FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES
JUNGLE STORIES
KI-GOR—
AND THE
FORBIDDEN MOUNTAIN
KI-GOR AND HELENE FALL PREY TO RINA, CRUEL EMPRESS OF A LOST WHITE EMPIRE.
A NEW KI-GOR NOVEL
by JOHN PETER DRUMMOND
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by CLYDE IRVINE
THE LION KING
by ARMAND BRICAUD
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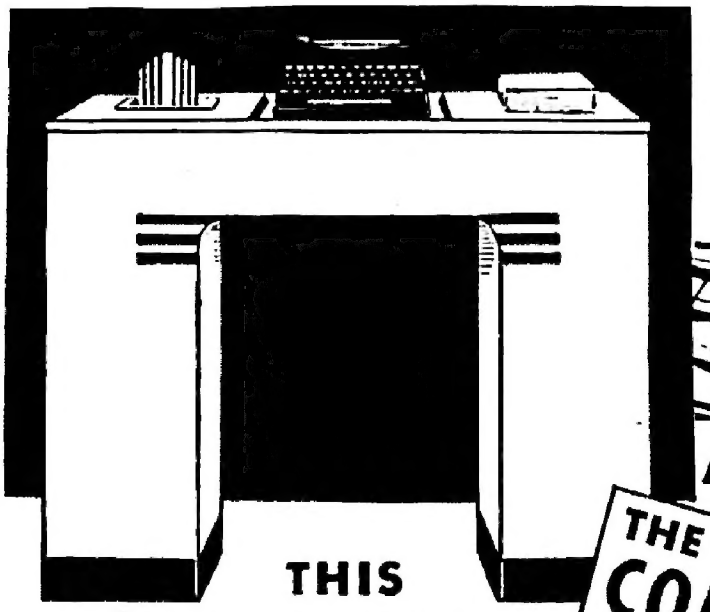

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JUNGLE STORIES

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A Thrilling Ki-Gor Novel

Ki-Gor—and the Forbidden Mountain

By John Peter Drummond

More terrible than the Leopard-men's flesh-shredding axes was the venal wrath of Rina, blood-thirsty Jungle Dictatress.

"WELL! That seems to be that!" Helene shook her curly red locks in exasperation and glared at the retreating backs of their half a dozen skinny-legged Congo blacks.

"What'll we do, Ki-Gor?" The American girl turned to her companion. "Oh, it makes me sick! When I think of all that

beautiful equipment we started out with, and how it's gradually dribbled away, until we're just down to the bare necessities"—she waved a brown hand at the several packing-cases that strewed the ground around her—"and now what happens! The last of the porters refuse to go any further! *We* can't carry all these boxes, Ki-Gor. What are we going to do?"

The giant white man sat down on one of the packing-cases, a ghost of a smile lurking in his lean, bronzed face.

"There's nothing to do, Helene," he said simply, "but leave the boxes here and go on by ourselves without them. We can pick a few things out and take them along but not very many."

Ki-Gor looked up the path where the last of the deserting porters was disappearing around a bend. Unlike Helene, he did not blame the porters for runing away. Right from the beginning, this *ulendo,* this journey to an undisclosed destination, had been dogged by ill fortune. Helene had insisted that she was going to take a few properties of civilization in with them, and to Ki-Gor's consternation, had assembled a vast quantity of stores, furnishings, weapons, clothes—even bottled water—a load which had required a safari of sixty porters to carry. In vain had Ki-Gor protested against the idea and pointed out that he and Helene had been safe and comfortable before, when they had lived in the jungle equipped with only a knife and an assegai. But, although the pampered daughter of civilization deeply loved the primitive jungle man, she insisted on having her own way in this matter.

"You say," she had said, "we are going to make a long trek to a place which you think will make us an ideal home. Why can't we take a few things with us to make that home even more ideal?"

In the end, Ki-Gor had had to give in and organize the safari, although he would have much preferred to have had no carriers at all—garrulous Bantu who would trot home afterwards, broadcasting the location of the snug retreat he had selected for the "ideal home." Consequently, he had not been too disturbed when the safari had run into bad omens—little happenings which had frightened the porters into deserting in twos and threes. Ki-Gor distrusted all Bantu people in general, and they knew it, and they feared him in return.

Until finally, the last six porters had deserted on the edge of the vast, miasmic swamp which stretched before them now.

"Ju-ju, Bwana," they had muttered, eyes rolling, and dumped their loads and trotted off in the other direction.

That happened about noon-time. Two hours later, Ki-Gor and Helene had pierced deep into the eternal twilight of the swamp along a narrow spur of high ground. They had salvaged a few articles from the boxes thrown down by the panicky blacks. They each wore revolvers and bandoliers, and between them they managed to carry a hunting rifle with ammunition, an ax, a flashlight, some mosquito netting, a supply of matches. Helene was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, breeches and hiking boots, but Ki-Gor had already stripped down to a loin cloth, around which was strapped a fine hunting-knife. Clouds of buzzing, biting insects followed the adventurers, swarming about Helene's protective netting, but having no effect on Ki-Gor's bronzed, immunized skin.

"But, Ki-Gor," Helene complained, "I don't see how you can tell where you're going."

THE gloom of the swampy forest was getting on her nerves. Except for the high-pitched singing of billions of insects, all sound was muffled. An occasional parrakeet screamed with startling suddenness, or a rhino bellowed abruptly in the distance, but the minute those noises stopped, the silence rushed back and engulfed the two lonely human beings. There was an unpleasantly dream-like quality lying heavy over everything.

"Years ago," said Ki-Gor, replying to Helene's complaint, "when I was still a boy, I was captured by slavers. I don't know where they were going to sell me, but they brought me down here, and took me through the swamp to the other side. I escaped from them and found a place to hide. They never found me and pretty soon I went back home. But the place where I hid was such a fine place to live that I have always thought that some day I would come back to it. We are going there now, and this is the way we get to it."

Soon after this conversation, the high ground came to an end. Ki-Gor promptly

attacked a broad tree-trunk with the ax and hewed a twenty foot log out of it. By the time the gray gloom of the swamp had shaded into the inky blackness of night, he had made good headway hollowing out the inside of the log into a rough dugout canoe. When dim daylight returned the following morning, Ki-Gor finished the dugout and the two adventurers set off in the frail, unsteady craft. Before them lay miles of narrow winding channels of black, oily water, a depressing, decaying labyrinth.

In order to help preserve the balance of the dugout, Ki-Gor had loaded it very carefully, putting the rifle, the ammunition, the ax, and the two bandoliers along the bottom. He made Helene take off her heavy boots in case the canoe tipped over. Both he and Helene kept a revolver handy for inquisitive crocodiles.

For two days they traveled in this way across the swamp, Ki-Gor's uncanny sense of direction somehow holding them to the right course. They spent the nights in trees, after Ki-Gor had explored them for snakes. On the third day, their way which had been leading through some broad expanses of still water, now began to return to narrower channels.

"We're getting there," Ki-Gor announced, "Not much longer in the swamp now."

Helene heaved a sigh of relief. She was quite ready to leave the swamp with its ever-present menace, its foul sense of decay, its brutish crocodiles slithering silently into the black water from muddy islands. Suddenly, the dugout rocked violently. Ki-Gor snatched up the revolver in front of him and fired pointblack into the wide-open jaws of a huge crocodile that reared up over the side. The creature bellowed in agony, and its short scaly forelegs clawed the edge of the dugout. Helene screamed as Ki-Gor fired again, then dropped the gun and pushed at the hideous jaws with his crude paddle.

The crocodile was mortally injured and started to sink. But one of its claws was caught on the rough wood of the dugout. Slowly inevitably, the frail craft began to roll over. By now the whole swamp was re-echoing with the flappings of a thousand crocodiles. Blind panic swept over Helene at the thought of falling into that oily, saurian-infested water. Disregarding Ki-Gor's warning shout, she half rose from her sitting position to squeeze against the upper gunwhale of the dugout.

Ki-Gor flailed savagely at the dying crocodile with his paddle, and finally, just as the canoe was about to capsize, dislodged the great claw. But Helene, in her panic, had unbalanced the canoe on the other side. Before she or Ki-Gor could quite realize what was happening, the dugout rolled over and they both went under.

A thrill of sickening horror went through the girl as she floundered in the black water. She fought toward the bobbing bottom of the capsized dugout. Something underwater grazed her thigh, and she pealed a terrified shriek. She kicked both legs frantically, half-turning in the water. Helene had more than ordinary courage, but to be tossed into a mass of crawling crocodiles was too much for her to bear, almost too much for her sanity. This is the end, she told herself, but oh! what a frightful death!

Then Ki-Gor was beside her, eyes blazing and nostrils flared. His left hand rested on her shoulders, and his right hand gripped his hunting-knife. For a brief second, Helene felt a rush of hope. Then the hope died swiftly, as she saw an ugly snout rippling through the water straight at them.

"Ki-Gor!" she screamed.

"Don't be afraid," the jungle man snapped. "Here! This vine hanging down here—grab it!"

Helene clutched frantically at the thick trailing vine that swung just over her head.

"It will hold you," Ki-Gor declared, "pull yourself up. Fast!"

THE vine was smooth and slippery and almost too thick for Helene to grasp properly. But she was driven by desperation and the horror of a ghastly fate from the slimy, scaly monsters of the swamp. Somehow she hauled herself halfway out of the oily water, then kicked and clawed her way up the vine.

Not until her feet emerged dripping from the water, and she hooked her ankles around the trailing end of the vine, gripping it like a vise, did she dare look down. What she saw nearly made her faint.

A gigantic crocodile was hurling halfway out of the water straight at Ki-Gor's

hunched shoulders. The long pointed jaws were horrible with rows of wicked teeth. Just as the monster snapped his great jaws shut, Ki-Gor flung himself to one side and toward the crocodile's tail. Swiftly the beast wheeled about but more swiftly Ki-Gor leaped for its back. The jaws snapped again and the great tail thrashed the water into yellow foam as Ki-Gor threw one leg over the crocodile's bull neck. A breathless second later, the jungle man was astride the heaving monster. A shattering roar rolled out into the swamp as Ki-Gor's knife-hand descended like a triphammer. The broad blade bit deep into the crocodile's eye socket, right down to the cunning brain.

As Ki-Gor wrenched out the knife, the crocodile dived. The jungle man slipped agilely off the scaly neck, swam five strokes through the sleazy, purpling water and grasped the bottom of the vine that Helene clung to.

"Just above you—" he panted, "a branch —see if you can reach it—"

Helene gathered her scattering wits and found that she could just curl her hand over the bough that overhung her. Summoning all her strength in one last tremendous effort, she kicked herself upward. Oh Lord! she prayed, what if I can't get up there in time! What if another crocodile comes along before Ki-Gor can swing himself out of the water!

And then, miraculously, she was up on the bough, balancing precariously on her stomach. A moment later, Ki-Gor was clambering up the vine. His strong hand guided her to a safer position, and then he swung himself up beside her. Together, they looked down at that frightful pool below them. Its oily surface was swarming with crocodiles now, bellowing and clacking their immense jaws, enraged and maddened by the smell and taste of greasy blood. Helene shuddered and looked away.

"Don't be afraid," said Ki-Gor simply, "The danger is all over now. You will have to learn to travel through the trees, though, so that we can get out of the swamp."

Fortunately, there were not many miles left to go before they would reach dry land. Although Helene had seen Ki-Gor swinging through tree-tops before, she had never attempted the feat herself, and it was with a highly apprehensive mind that she followed Ki-Gor, now, up the great tree.

Up near the top of this tree, the vegetation was so thick and matted that they could not even force their way through it. This turned out to be an advantage a little later. Ki-Gor patiently cut a hole in the green ceiling with his knife, and the two emerged into the brazen African sunlight. Now, Helene discovered that the thick vegetation that stretched before them would bear their weight for yards at a time. She followed Ki-Gor along this springy, precarious footing with a feeling of elation. At least, they were out of that foul, dank swamp.

Every so often they would come upon breaks and chasms in the green network of branches. Then Ki-Gor would select a vine twenty-or-so feet long, that was securely anchored from the top, wind it around Helene's waist and set her to swinging on the bottom end of it. Eventually, she would swing close enough to a tree across the chasm to seize a branch and pull herself on to it. Then she would unfasten the vine and sent it swinging back to Ki-Gor. A moment later he would hurtle through the air and land deftly beside her.

IN that manner they progressed for several hours through swarms of chattering monkeys and screaming parakeets, until the thinning of the vegetation under their feet warned them that they were approaching the edge of the swamp. When night fell, they clambered down to the lower branches of a baobab tree and went to sleep in a broad crotch formed by the junction of three main limbs. By noon of the next day, they stood on a high grassy knoll and looked back at the grim menacing belt of swamp-forest through which they had come. Helene drew a deep shuddering sigh of relief.

Ki-Gor suddenly burst out laughing. Helene looked at him in astonishment.

"I was thinking," Ki-Gor said, blue eyes twinkling, "of that safari, and all the things we started out to bring with us, so that our life in the jungle would be easier and happier. First, we had sixty carriers, then thirty. Then we had only six, and finally none. Then we took revolvers and a rifle and ammunition and the little flame-twigs —matches—and they are all at the bottom

of the swamp, along with your boots."

"I don't see what there is to laugh about," Helen said, a little tartly, "I wish we had those things with us, right now."

"I don't," Ki-Gor returned cheerfully. "Here we stand—no shoes, few clothes, no guns—and I am happy. It reminds me of the day you fell out of the sky at my feet in your red airplane. In those days I didn't know there *was* such a thing as a white woman. I didn't know there were other white men in the world and that I belonged to the tribe of the English. Remember how you had to teach me how to speak the language of my dead father?"

Helene nodded with an amused, reminiscent smile.

"I was so happy after you came into my life, Helene," Ki-Gor continued, "Remember the home we had in the lone tree?"

"That was a lovely home," Helene said enthusiastically.

"Well, the new home I'm taking you to now," said Ki-Gor, "is even better. Much better. And I am so glad we are going to it, just the two of us, with a knife for a weapon. I was not happy with my own people. There were too many of them, and they lived like ants, millions of ants. I am glad we are back in Africa, going to our secret place that nobody in the world will know about. But I must get busy and make a bow and some arrows so that we can shoot some meat for food."

The next three days, they stayed at that place while Ki-Gor fashioned the bow out of a stout sapling. When he finished it, it was not a particularly graceful weapon. It was short and thick and curved only very slightly. But it was easy to handle and adaptable for quick shooting, and only a man of Ki-Gor's prodigious strength could bend it. For a bow-string, Ki-Gor carefully cut a strip from his rawhide belt. Arrows he whittled from hardwood splinters, and baked their needle-sharp points to harder them. After the arrows were fitted with feathers, Ki-Gor tried them out. He proved to himself that he had a weapon which was accurate and deadly up to a distance of a hundred yards.

Ki-Gor now would have set about to do something about Helene's clothing. Her shirt and riding breeches were in shreds and she was bare-footed, but she maintained that she could wait until they got to their destination before getting new clothes. So they stayed no longer on the grassy upland, but plunged into the densely wooded rolling country to the west.

After several hours of slow going, partly along the ground and partly through the trees when the undergrowth became too thick, they came upon a narrow but well-worn trail. It was obviously man-made, not an elephant track. Ki-Gor grunted with satisfaction.

"The Slaver's Road," he observed, "I remember it well. I was taken along it going westward, the way we are now. I don't know how far it goes—maybe all the way to the sea. About a day's journey from here, I escaped from the slavers and went southward. In that way I came upon the place I am leading you to, now. This trail will make easier going for your bare feet, Helene, so we will follow it."

So they proceeded along the Slaver's Road in single file, Helene in the lead so that she could set the pace and Ki-Gor close behind, his keen eyes restlessly searching the forest for hidden dangers. But not even Ki-Gor could look in all directions at once, and danger spread its dark wings before the wayfarers had been on the path an hour.

As they rounded a bend, Ki-Kor automatically noted a large tree with low, spreading branches just beside the path. But just at that moment, he heard a suspicious noise behind him. He twisted his head to look back over his shoulders, and for that brief moment, left Helene unguarded. Helene walked under a branch of the big tree blissfully unconscious of the leopard that was flattened along the top side of that branch, gathering its muscles to spring on her. She was unaware of any danger until, suddenly, a small, furry object dropped chattering out of the tree and landed on her shoulder. Automatically Helene dropped to the ground and that action saved her life. The leopard, with all the perverse cruelty of its kind, sprang —but overshot its mark by two feet.

AS the twisting, yellow body landed on the path, Ki-Gor went into action. A split-second before, he had turned his head forward, seen the leopard in mid-air, seen Helene on the ground with a small, terrified monkey stuttering on her shoulder. So

swiftly that the eye could hardly follow it, his right hand notched an arrow in the ready bow. As the enraged leopard raised its snarling head to spring on Helene again, a three-foot shaft of hardwood zipped between its wide-open jaws and bored through the roof of its mouth into its brain. The brute leaped convulsively straight up into the air and fell heavily in a heap. A shudder rippled over the beautiful spotted skin, and a twitch, and the leopard died.

Ki-Gor stepped over Helene's prostrate form, sheathed his knife, and helped her to her feet.

"Whew! That was close!" Helene said with a weak smile, "If it hadn't been for this little monkey—"

Ki-Kor picked it protesting from Helene's shoulder. It was a baby vervet with a handsome green coat and a worried old-man's face. It seemed tame, quite unafraid of Ki-Gor, but it reached out its hairy little arms toward Helene.

"Ah, the cute thing!" Helene exclaimed, "Give him to me. He saved my life. Can we keep him, Ki-Gor? I'll carry him, he isn't heavy. He'll be a wonderful pet—I'm going to call him 'O'Brien'."

Ki-Gor smiled and nodded. He was secretly more grateful to the little vervet than he could ever have put into words. He turned abruptly and bent over the dead leopard. Arrows took time to make and were therefore not to be wasted. He carefully drew the arrow out of the leopards mouth and wiped it on the grass beside the trail. In the middle of this operation he paused and reared his head.

"Shh!" he commanded Helene.

Off in the distance somewhere a human voice floated on the air in a song. It was the characteristic Bantu falsetto.

Swiftly and silently, Ki-Gor helped Helene up the big tree beside the path and then followed her himself. They were barely settled on a leafy bough commanding a view of the trail, when the singer appeared.

It was a slight, harmless looking young Negro, unarmed and leading a gray nanny-goat by a short length of rope. He was singing a short, sad little musical phrase, repeating it endlessly, monotonously. It sounded to Ki-Gor like a ju-ju song or incantation of some kind. Abruptly the song broke off as the native discovered the dead leopard.

Up in the tree, Ki-Gor and Helene watched the Negro circle the still form warily and finally squat down beside it. On general principles Ki-Gor was silent. But, too late he thought of the little vervet. The stillness of the jungle was broken by a shrill chattering as the tiny green monkey broke away from Helene and ran out on the limb over the path.

But the black ignored the noise above him and did not raise his head. The little monkey redoubled its scolding. It danced with rage and leapt over to another branch. Just then Ki-Gor and Helene saw why the vervet was raising such a fuss. It was not on account of the Negro. It was a noisy warning calling attention to a menacing black-and-yellow spotted form that was creeping up the path behind the Negro. The leopard's mate!

Then, five seconds later, Ki-Gor realized that the crouching, creeping figure in the path was not a leopard. It was a man—a black—dressed in a leopard skin. Just under the skin a black hand clutched a cruel iron claw. A little prickle ran down Ki-Gor's spine, and his mouth twisted in an involuntary snarl. A harmless, lone black was being stalked by a member of the dread Leopard Society. This secret, widespread, inter-tribal fraternity killed their victims in just this manner.

Closer and closer the Leopard man crept toward his quarry. The young Negro remained squatting beside the carcass of the leopard, completely oblivious of the frightful danger that threatened him. Finally Ki-Gor could stand it no longer. Ordinarily, he was unmoved by the sight of one Bantu killing another Bantu. In general, he disliked all Bantu. But this case was different. A peaceful traveler was about to be slaughtered with all the fiendish savagery which the Leopard Society employed.

Stealthily, Ki-Gor notched an arrow in the rawhide bowstring.

Whether it was the incessant clamor from the monkey, or whether it was an instinctive, last minute warning within himself, the unarmed black suddenly glanced swiftly over his shoulder and saw the Leopard man. To Ki-Gor's surprise, the young Negro showed no panic. He

stood up quietly and faced his doom, his smooth black countenance a calm inscrutable mask.

The Leopard man stood up, too, an expression of malevolent triumph on the face below the grinning leopard's head. The hand with the iron claw rose slowly.

Ki-Gor felt Helene's hand tremble on his shoulder. He nodded, took careful aim.

A SECOND later, the Leopard man uttered a gurgling screech. For a moment he ran around in a little circle. A three-foot arrow had gone through his throat and stuck out the back of his neck as if it had been driven through with a sledge hammer. He was dead before Ki-Gor and Helene reached the ground.

The slight young man whose life had been so miraculously saved turned and watched the white man and woman step out on to the path. A momentary flicker of astonishment went over his ebony face, then disappeared, leaving a complete absence of expression there. He raised his right arm in greeting, and spoke sonorously in Swahili.

"If you are the benevolent instrument of Fate, I bow at your feet. If, on the other hand, you have but interfered with the delicate workings of Fate, then I say you are a fool. And this region is no place for a *msabu* without shoes."

"Peace to you," Ki-Gor answered, also in Swahili, trying not to smile at the complete lack of personal gratitude in the Negro. "I am Ki-Gor and I am assuredly an instrument of Fate, benevolent or otherwise. This is my woman and she needs shoes no more than a Bantu."

The young black studied Ki-Gor for a moment and then spoke again.

"I am Kainya, a Kikuyu from Kenya. I am on a private pilgrimage of my own, visiting various wise men on my way and learning to make new kinds of *ju-ju*."

Ki-Gor nodded solemnly. "It is a long way to Kenya. May you return there safely, O Little Brother of the Dog."

Ki-Gor pronounced the last words slowly and distinctly, and they produced an effect on the young native. Although his face remained calm, his eyelids blinked rapidly. "What do you know of the Brotherhood, O Ki-Gor?" he asked softly, "and how did you know I belonged to it?"

"When you raised your arm I saw the dog's head tattooed in your armpit," Ki-Gor answered simply, "I learned of the Brotherhood of the Dog from an ancient man who was my friend, Tsempala of the tribe of the N'Gori."

"You have sharp eyes, O Ki-Gor," the native said soberly, "and good friends. I have heard of Tsempala, who is a very distinguished *ju-ju* doctor. On my way home, I planned to visit him and sit at his feet for a time."

"Tell him for me," said the jungle man, "that Ki-Gor sends greetings and that his whereabouts are a secret—to be revealed only to men of discretion."

The young native stared at the ground.

"I will bear your message, O Ki-Gor, and I understand your meaning. But because you are a friend of the Brotherhood, I must give you a warning. This region you are entering is unhappy and accursed. It is a rich mountain forest land full of game, yet there are only a few terrified tribes living in it. An evil genius seems to hang over the region, and it is constantly raided by men of the Leopard Society from the tribes on the coast. The Leopard men kill the weak, and enslave the strong."

"But where on the coast can slaves be sold now?" said Ki-Gor with a frown. "There are no Arabs on this coast, and only the Arabs deal in slaves these days."

"That is a mystery," said Kainya. "The Leopard men do not sell their slaves on the coast. No one knows where they do sell them."

"Then, that is indeed a mystery," Ki-Gor replied, "I thank you for the warning. I do not fear the Leopard men, but I will be watchful lest they come in too great number."

"I can say no more," Kainya intoned impassively. "Peace and long life to you and your woman, O Ki-Gor. You gave me my life this day, so in return I give you this goat. Her name is Shuba and she gives a quantity of rich milk. Keep her beside you, and you will never go hungry."

Ki-Gor nodded his head sagely. "It is good. Thanks and farewell, O Kainya."

"Farewell, O Ki-Gor," Kainya chanted and went off down the trail singing his monotonous song.

HELENE waited until the young Negro was well out of sight, and then she began to giggle.

"Well, for Heaven's sake!" she gasped, "I couldn't understand much of what you were talking about, but I thought I'd die when he handed you the end of the rope he was leading the goat with. What on earth are we ever going to do with a goat?"

"We'll have to take it with us," Ki-Gor shrugged, "It is a gift. And if the lions and leopards don't get it, we will have good milk."

Immediately, he set about disposing of the bodies of the leopard and the Leopard man, thriftily salvaging his barbless arrow from the neck of the latter. With that accomplished, the two wayfarers started westward on the Slaver's Road once again —Helene, with O'Brien, the green monkey, on her shoulder, and Ki-Gor leading Shuba, the she-goat.

For a day and a half they traveled on the well-worn trail, through country that became increasingly rugged. For the most part it led through thick, upland jungle, but now and then it crossed small open plateaus. From these, the travelers got fine views of steep, well-wooded mountains that lay all about them. And from one of these open pastures, Ki-Gor decided to leave the Slaver's Road and strike south.

For a time it was difficult going, but eventually they struck a dry river-bed and followed the bare stones around the base of a mountain. Late in the afternoon, Ki-Gor led the way off the river-bed through a forest of tall trees for some distance. Just before sunset, they arrived at the base of a cliff, and Ki-Gor turned to Helene with a smile.

"Here we are," he said.

Helene looked blankly at him and then around her. On one side of her was an immensely tall tree, whose lowest branches must have been forty feet off the ground. On the other side a great grey cliff went up sheerly for a good two hundred feet. It stretched across the side of the mountain for perhaps an eighth of a mile. and was smooth-worn rock, offering no toeholds anywhere on its vertical plane.

"Is this—this the ideal home?" Helene faltered.

"Look," Ki-Gor commanded, and pointed up the cliff.

Helene stared upward at the surface of the cliff, rosy now with the rays of the setting sun. Comprehension dawned on her.

First she saw the tiny waterfall that issued straight out of the cliff from halfway up. Then right beside it she saw a hole, and then another hole. All in all, there were five holes in the cliff, all close together, but at different levels.

"Caves?" she questioned.

Ki-Gor nodded triumphantly.

"But how on earth do we ever get up there?"

"Well, I can get up by this tree," Ki-Gor said, indicating the forest giant beside them, whose leafy top almost obscured the cave mouths. "But it would be hard for you. When I was here last, I made a machine and left it up in the main cave. If the white ants haven't got into it, it should still be all right. If it isn't all right, we'll stay down here tonight, and I'll make a new machine tomorrow."

With that, Ki-Gor stepped to the base of the great tree, got a good grip on the mass of parasitic vines that twined around the massive trunk, and climbed steadily and surely straight up until he was hidden from view. A short while later, Helen saw one of the topmost branches being agitated, and in a moment Ki-Gor appeared far up there, swinging on the end of a free length of vine. Helene's heart went up into her mouth as the jungle man blithely swung back and forth like a pendulum at that dizzy height. But one last swing landed him accurately at one of the cave mouths, and he dropped off safely with a shout of triumph.

A FEW minutes later, Ki-Gor's head appeared in the cave mouth which was right beside the little waterfall. He seemed to be working very hard, tugging and hauling at something; and Helene gathered that the "machine" he had left there years before was still workable. Then a pair of large logs protruded a foot or so from the cave mouth, and Ki-Gor began paying a double length of stout rope down the cliff-face. A black bulky object was attached to the rope, and when it reached the foot of the cliff, Helene saw that it was a large, crude bucket made of stiff buffalo hide.

"Get in it!" Ki-Gor shouted down.

Wonderingly, Helene stepped into the bucket—its sides rose higher than her waist-line—and craned her neck upward.

"Hold on tight!" Ki-Gor shouted, and she saw that there was a similar bucket attached to the rope up at his end. He held the bucket under the waterfall, and as it filled up with water, Ki-Gor let it go. To her amazement, Helene felt herself lifted off the ground and hoisted upward along the face of the cliff. A few moments later, Ki-Gor helped her step out of the bucket on to the rock shelf in front of the cave mouth.

Helene had to stop and marvel at Ki-Gor's elevator. It was an amazing contrivance, a true example of Ki-Gor's crude mechanical genius. It consisted of the long piece of rope, whose ends were spliced together making it into a sort of endless belt. This was looped over a crude wooden pulley, which was supported between the two logs. Then the two buffalo hide buckets were firmly attached and one bucket filled with enough water to act as a counter balance to the weight of the human in the other bucket.

"I never in my life heard of anything so ingenious," Helene exclaimed admiringly.

Secretly, Ki-Gor was childishly proud of his elevator, but he affected not to think much of it, and abruptly led Helene back into the cave for a tour of inspection. But it turned out to be too late, darkness having set in with the speed and stealthiness of the African night. So Ki-Gor made two trips down the elevator to bring up the goat, Shuba, and some firewood.

They supped from goat's milk and sat nodding in front of a little fire for a short time. But the comfortable relaxed feeling that comes to all weary travelers soon overcame them; and they fell asleep.

II

THE next morning, Helene had an opportunity to make a thorough inspection of the "ideal home," and found, indeed, that it lacked very little. A hundred feet up the cliff wall, safe from enemies, human or otherwise, there were no less than eight cave apartments, roomy and dry, and comparatively clean. In the ceiling of one of them was a narrow fissure which extended upward an undetermined distance. It made an excellent flue when a fire was lighted beneath it, carrying the smoke off admirably. That compartment was obviously the kitchen.

Another small cave—they were all intercommunicating—led out onto a narrow grassy ledge. This was a sort of set-back in the cliff wall and extended a considerable distance. No better or safer pasture could be found for Shuba, the goat, and she was given the run of the shelf.

Finally, a narrow shaly chimney led upward to a small opening far above the other cave mouths. This hole-in-the-cliff was at a higher level than the tree tops of the forest, and, therefore, commanded a fine view of the mountainous panorama to the west.

There followed now a succession of days of unalloyed, uninterrupted happiness. Ki-Gor plunged into furious activity, cleaning out the caves, strengthening the elevator, laying in a supply of firewood, making more arrows. He also found time to shoot some game, to hang out strips of venison to dry in the sun, and to make a pair of buckskin slippers for Helene. Indeed, if Helene had any complaint, all this time, it was that Ki-Gor's tremendous energy left little or nothing for her to do. Ki-Gor reluctantly conceded her a few duties, such as milking the gentle Shuba, but for the most part, he insisted that she take her ease while he did the work. Above all, he warned her never to leave the caves while he was away hunting.

The cliff was probably as pleasant and healthful a place to live as any that could be found in West Equatorial Africa. The jungle below was dark, gloomy and vaguely menacing, but the caves were high enough to receive the prevailing west winds which made them cool and fresh and livable. It was particularly nice at sunset. Ki-Gor and Helene fell into the habit of going up to the lookout, the highest cave mouth, and watch the sun go down behind the largest mountain in the range to the west.

This mountain had a rather unusual appearance. It stood by itself, its steep sides rising out of low ground up to a surprisingly flat top. The effect was as if the top half of a gigantic cone had been sheared off. For several evenings, Ki-Gor and Helene watched entranced as the sun set at the exact middle of the horizontal line

that marked the flat top of the mountain.

One evening they lingered a little longer at the lookout, until the soft African dusk had all but blotted out the outline of the mountains. Suddenly, Ki-Gor clutched Helene's elbow.

"Look!" he commanded.

"Where?"

"On the flat-topped mountain. Along the top."

"Oh, yes!" said Helene, staring through the darkness, "there seems to be some kind of a light over there—or is it a fire? It's flickering."

"It's a fire," Ki-Gor affirmed, "and it must be a big one, or we wouldn't be able to see it. That mountain is quite far away."

"Well, do you think it means that there are people over there?"

"I don't know," Ki-Gor replied soberly, "but I think it does. It looks to me like a big—er—whatyoucall—bonfire. Or maybe several of them."

Helene shivered a little and sought Ki-Gor's hand. The distant flickering light somehow seemed like an evil, menacing portent. For the first time since they had moved into the caves, they had received a sign of human occupation of their neighborhood. Helene could not help but recall the words of Kainya, the Kikuyu youth, who had said that the region was accursed.

THE next morning, Ki-Gor announced that he was going to spend the day exploring around the foot of the flat-topped mountain.

"It is quite far over there," he said, "and so I might not come back tonight. Don't worry or be afraid about me. And you stay up here in the caves. Don't go down to the ground for any reason. As long as you are up here you are safe."

Helene knew that Ki-Gor's injunction was very sensible and she readily agreed to abide by it. She watched him pull himself down the elevator, and when he reached the ground below she took hold of the counter-balancing bucket of water which had jerked up to the cave mouth and swung it inward so that it rested on the rock shelf. Then, as Ki-Gor waved good-bye and plunged into the jungle, she drew up the other bucket and all the rope with it. Feeling perfectly secure from any interlopers, she walked around in her cave fortress looking for something to do.

Unfortunately, there was very little to do. Helene amused herself for a while by playing a game of hide-and-seek with O'Brien, the little green monkey. But eventually that began to pall, and Helene discovered that she was profoundly bored. She began to wish that she had not promised Ki-Gor that she would not leave the caves. After all, she argued, what harm could come to her? She needn't go very far. Suddenly it occurred to her that there was something she could do without even going out of sight of the cliff. She had often noticed that there were numberless wild guinea fowl in the thickets around the foot of the cliff. It was extremely likely that she would find nests there. An omelet of guinea fowl eggs would be a welcome novelty in the jungle diet that Ki-Gor was providing.

It did not take Helene long to convince herself that there was no harm in descending the elevator for a few minutes to hunt guinea fowl eggs. She even felt a little proud of herself as she hauled herself downward. At last, she was being useful!

O'Brien came along with her, perched on her shoulder. And even though O'Brien was only a small baby monkey, his presence was reassuring. His shrill chatter made the jungle silence somehow less ominous.

Helene flushed covey after covey of wild fowl, but she was disappointed in her efforts to find any nests. So she pressed through the thickets a little distance. Still no nests. She went still a little farther.

Suddenly she realized that she had gone farther than she had ever intended to go. She cast a frightened glance around her at the still, brooding jungle, and wondered if she would be able to find her way back. Fighting down a tiny feeling of terror within her that threatened to develop into a panic, she turned and deliberately began to retrace her steps.

It was slow going and nerve wracking. She had to concentrate to find her own footprints, or broken or bent branches which indicated what way she had come. And sometimes it seemed as if the jungle had just closed in after her, leaving no trace of her progress. At such times she held on to herself and stood stock still for minutes at a time until her searching eyes

could eventually locate a tiny sign.

Somehow, O'Brien caught her mood and stopped his chattering, and that made it worse. The silence of the jungle was terrifying.

AFTER she had been following her back-trail for what seemed hours, Helene came to a slender, many-branched tree. She decided to climb it and see if she could not get a view over the top of the tall undergrowth. It would be a means of telling herself how far from home she still was.

The first few branches were easy, but then as she reached up for a new handhold on a branch above her, her hand closed on something that moved. She gave a little queak of terror as a tiny tree-snake slithered out from under her hand and dropped off the branch. She leaned against the trunk of the tree and shook for a full minute before she could go on. But when she got to the top of the tree, she forgot her fright and a wave of relief went over her. She could see the cliff and the elevator, not two hundred feet straight in front of her. Her careful back-trailing had brought her back almost to the exact spot that she had started from.

Helene stared gratefully at the big bucket at the foot of the cliff, and then prepared to climb down the tree. But something made her look again at the bucket. And she realized that something was terribly wrong.

When she had come down the elevator, the counter-balancing bucket, being filled with water, had, of course, gone up to the cave mouth. To prevent it from coming down again of its own weight, when she got out of the other bucket, she hooked it under a projecting spur of rock.

But the bucket she saw now on the ground was the counter-balancing one, filled with water. In other words, somebody was up in the caves right at that minute.

Who was it?

Was it Ki-Gor, back early? Or was it some stranger?

Helene began to shake again. Why, why, she asked herself bitterly, did she have to be so headstrong and disregard Ki-Gor's warning? If she had only stayed up in the caves where she belonged, nobody could have gotten up there, and she wouldn't be sitting now in a treetop quaking with terror.

Suddenly, the water-filled bucket twitched, jerked, and then went sailing upward out of sight. A moment later, the passenger bucket came into view. As it reached the ground, a squat, black, ugly Negro stepped out of it, and hooked it under the rock. Unconscious of Helene's horrified gaze, the black glanced furtively around him and then started drifting toward the thicket over which Helene was perched.

To make matters worse, O'Brien chose that moment to begin objecting to the stranger's presence. The little monkey flung itself down the tree, spitting and scolding. While Helene held her breath, the black glanced casually at the thicket, turned and walked off in another direction. O'Brien raged along in the bushes beside him.

The monkey followed the sinister looking black far out of sight, and then returned to Helene, running and leaping stiff-legged through the trees. O'Brien was very proud of himself.

It was quite the opposite with Helene.

EVEN though the squat Negro had disappeared, she was still almost too frightened to breathe, and certainly too frightened to move out of the tree-top. For all she knew, the black might be hiding somewhere nearby where he could watch the elevator. Or worse still, he might not have been the only visitor. There might be other blacks still up in the caves, lying in wait for the owners to return.

Helene did not know what to do. In the end she decided that the safest and most sensible thing was to stay right where she was until Ki-Gor came back. There was the blood-chilling possibility that Ki-Gor might not come back at all that day, and she might have to spend the night in her uncomfortable perch. But that was the chance she had to take.

The next hours seemed to her to be the longest of her life. The jungle steamed and whispered around her, while the sun seemed to be riveted in one spot in the hot sky. Helene, crouching in her tree-top, began to despair of the day ever passing, when suddenly O'Brien scrambled down

the tree, scolding. A few seconds later his tone changed to an amiable whine. The bushes parted below the tree and Ki-Gor stepped out and looked up at Helene.

It was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears of sheer relief. But she kept a grip on herself and came down the tree and told Ki-Gor all that had happened.

"It's my fault, Ki-Gor," she finished contritely. "None of it would have happened if I hadn't disobeyed you and come down to the ground."

"Never mind," said Ki-Gor, his eyes wandering up to the tree-top. "You are safe. Now, I'm sure there is nobody hidden anywhere down here, because I scouted the ground very carefully on my way in. But there may be somebody waiting for us in the cave. You stay right here and I'll find out."

"Be careful, Ki-Gor," Helene pleaded.

"Don't worry," he returned, "I'm not going to take the elevator."

He went away from her noiselessly, and when Helene saw him next, he was climbing the great tree like a cat. If there was anybody waiting in the caves, Ki-Gor was going to take them by surprise.

There was no sound for five or six minutes—minutes of agonized suspense for Helene—when suddenly she heard Ki-Gor's voice calling her.

"It's all right, Helene," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Come up the elevator."

As she stepped out of the bucket into the cave mouth, Ki-Gor smiled and pointed at the inner transverse wall of the cave. The rays of the afternoon sun slanted in and struck directly upon this wall and Helene gasped. The whitish-gray wall was covered with a series of pictures, line drawings, boldly drawn in charcoal. Judged by European standards, the pictures were crude, and yet there was a certain style, a quality of sureness about them, that showed that the person who drew them was, in his way, a good artist.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" Helene exclaimed. "Why did he do that?"

"It's a message," Ki-Gor said. "The man who was here is a member of the Brotherhood of the Dog. He came to give us a warning. We were not here, so he put the message on the wall in pictures."

"Oh!" murmured Helene, wonderingly, and stared at the drawings. "Well, can you read the message, Ki-Gor?"

"Some of it," Ki-Gor replied, "and some of it I don't understand."

He pointed to two round cat-like heads, obvious representations of leopard's heads. Below them was a single human foot-print.

"That means look out for the Leopard Society," Ki-Gor observed. "They have found my spoor. And this"—indicating a pair of human hands joined together at the wrists by a chain—"I think this means that the Leopard Society will sell us for slaves if they catch us. And the next picture must be where he is trying to tell us of another danger. Maybe he means that is the place the Leopard Society would sell us into slavery. But I still don't understand it all."

KI-GOR looked thoughtfully at the last and biggest drawing. There was little doubt that it was meant to represent a mountain—a cone-shaped mountain whose top half had been sheared off. On each side of it, several straight lines slanted downward, and on each side of the base, several wavy lines went upward vertically. But the strangest part of the picture was the female figure drawn in profile standing on top of the mountain. This figure had the short, stout legs, long trunk and prominent breasts typical of Congo woodcarvings, but most curious of all was the way the lower half of it was blacked in, while the upper half was left white.

"Why, that's a picture of the flat-topped mountain," cried Helene, "the one to the east of us, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ki-Gor replied, still studying the drawing, "it's the flat-topped mountain, and there's rain coming down, and smoke or fog rising up from the bottom of it. And up on the top, there is a black-and-white woman. I don't know what it means."

"What's this down here," said Helene, pointing. "It looks like the head of a fox or a wolf."

"It's a dog," Ki-Gor answered, "that's the way our friend signed his message—with the sign of the Brotherhood of the Dog."

Helene shivered. There was something about that phrase—Brotherhood of the Dog—that made her glad it was a friend

and not an enemy. Anyhow, she was glad it was not the Leopard Society.

"Maybe tomorrow," Ki-Gor said, "I can find out more what this means. I don't understand why our friend showed it raining on that mountain, when it is still the dry season. Except for a thunder storm, maybe, there won't be any rain around here for another month. I'm going over to the mountain, tomorrow, and see what I can find out."

"I thought that's where you went today," said Helene with some surprise.

"No," said Ki-Gor soberly, "I started out that way, but I wasn't half a mile from here when I found that I was being followed."

"Followed!"

"Yes. By two men of the Leopard Society."

"Ki-Gor!"

"Yes, just as our friend, the Brother of the Dog, has told us in this picture. I would have killed these two, but when I doubled back and around them, I saw that there were ten more of them—too many to risk fighting. So I spent the rest of the day leading them far away from here. I went fast but just slow enough so that they could not lose me. And when they finally tried to close in on me, I took to trees and they lost my trail entirely. I came back the other side of our mountain here."

"Heavens! If I'd have known all that, I'd have—"

"Helene," Ki-Gor smiled, "don't be afraid about me, ever. I am Ki-Gor, Lord of the Jungle. And the reason I am Lord of the Jungle is that I am stronger and more cunning than my enemies."

It was a simple statement of fact, and there was not a trace of boastfulness in Ki-Gor's manner as he made it. Helene smiled ruefully at him.

"Well—I know," she admitted, "but I wish we weren't so close to enemies. Do you think there may be something in the warnings we have received about this region? These caves are comfortable and all, but if there's constant danger about—maybe we should—"

"Move away?" Ki-Gor completed her hesitant sentence. "Yes, we might find that it would be better to move away. Tomorrow we'll know better what to do after I scout around the flat-topped mountain."

The next morning, Ki-Gor once again warned Helene not to leave the caves. She nodded her head meekly, and he hauled himself to the ground by the elevator. At the foot of the cliff he stood and watched her swing the counter-balancing bucket in and pull up the rope, then with a reassuring wave of his hand, he swung himself up into a tree and proceeded toward the west via the tree-route.

He covered two miles in this manner, and then the dense jungle began to thin out into park land. Ki-Gor judged that he was far enough from the caves to risk leaving a ground-trail. Accordingly he descended to the grassy earth and turned northward with his great ground-covering strides. Traveling swiftly, he came to the Slaver's Road, and followed it in a westerly direction, jogging tirelessly mile after winding mile.

IT was just past noon when Ki-Gor arrived at a point where the trail widened considerably, and where another trail gave off from it to the left. The jungle man perceived that this thoroughfare had been frequently and recently used. He followed it cautiously for a short distance and then halted suddenly, amazed.

He was standing at the edge of the tree line on what appeared at first glance to be the bank of a wide dry river bed. It was a strip of arid land, at least a hundred yards across, that stretched away in both directions in an almost imperceptible curve around the base of a great mountain. Across the strip, the densely wooded sides of the mountain rose up sharply, and Ki-Gor guessed that he was at the foot of the flat-topped mountain.

There was something about that wide barren strip that did not seem quite right or natural, something vaguely disturbing, almost menacing about the atmosphere surrounding it. Unconsciously, Ki-Gor sniffed the air and thought he detected a slight sulphurous odor. He stepped off the path with a frown and squatted on his heels to study the situation.

The more he stared at the treeless, grassless belt of ground, the more he became convinced that it was *not* a river bed. The boulders and ledges were deeply eroded. But this erosion was not in one direction

horizontally, the way a stream wears smooth the rocks and ledges in its path. This erosion was vertical—downward as rain and wind nibbles away in the course of centuries the softer layers of rock in a great boulder. Ki-Gor noted with interest that the path continued into and across the arid land. He assumed that it went across, although actually it veered off to one side and out of sight around a fantastically shaped rock-spur a few yards in front of him.

There was something so unhealthy and forboding about the place that Ki-Gor stood up very soon, eyes and ears alert, and trotted back up the path to the Slaver's Road. There he turned eastward, in the direction of the cave-cliff, and hurried along in his effortless, ground-covering gait. But, eager though he was to get back to Helene before sundown, his nerves were too tensely drawn for him to be the slightest bit unaware of anything suspicious in the jungle around him. And very soon his abnormally heightened perceptions told him that he was being followed.

At first he gave no sign that he was aware of his stalker, but continued his swift lope along the Slaver's Road. His nerves were tingling, though, and he was ready for instant action the minute his pursuer betrayed himself.

But this unseen pursuer was skilled in the ways of the jungle, too, and was adept at staying within reach of Ki-Gor without showing himself. After a mile or two of this pursuit, Ki-Gor compressed his lips in a grim line, and determined to do something about the situation. He slackened his pace a little, sacrificing speed to dance lightly along on the balls of his feet. His sinewy knees acted as powerful shock absorbers for his great weight so that his feet no longer drummed on the ground. He could have passed unheard within ten feet of a man whose ear was to the earth.

He went on that way for several hundred yards, and then, as the trail made a sharp curve, he slipped silently to one side and sank down behind a broad-leafed banana tree. In a few moments, a naked black came hurrying noiselessly along the trail, his brow furrowed in concentration. He was short, squat, and ugly, with immense shoulders and long arms.

Ki-Gor crouched, muscles tensed, and just as the Bantu came abreast of him, he sprang. Too late the Negro heard the warning rustle of banana leaves. He whirled with a choked cry. But Ki-Gor landed on his back and bore him savagely to the packed earth of the trail. The great black shoulders heaved and twisted, but Ki-Gor trussed the Negro's long arms in a grip of steel and snarled down into his ugly face.

"Quick!" he hissed in Swahili. "What have you to say before I plunge my knife into your throat? Who set you on my trail?"

The Negro shook his head helplessly and his thick lips parted in a pathetic smile.

"Nay, Bwana Ki-Gor, no one has set me on your trail. And do not strike one who is a friend."

WITHOUT relaxing his grip in the slightest, Ki-Gor said coldly, "My friends do not stalk me as if I were a spring-bok. And I have many enemies who know my name."

"No enemy am I, Bwana Ki-Gor," the black responded, his eyes rolling in appeal. "I should have known better than to follow you without making my presence known to you. But when I first saw you, you were at the foot of the Forbidden Mountain. I wanted to have an *indaba* with you, but that is a dangerous spot to linger around. So I followed you, thinking to speak to you when we were both at a safe distance away from the accursed place."

Ki-Gor paused, his eyes narrowed in doubt.

"Who are you?" he said finally, "and how shall I know you are indeed a friend, and not a glib-tongued trickster?"

"I am Toogli," the Negro replied, "of the Bushongo tribe, and I am indeed your friend, for I am he who drew the picture-message on the walls of your cave."

"If that is true," Ki-Gor said slowly, "then you must be of the Brotherhood of the Dog."

"I am of the Brotherhood," the Bushongo affirmed, "and there is a way to prove it. If you will release my left arm, I will lift it ever so discreetly, and you will see the Head of the Dog tattooed in the arm-pit."

Ki-Gor considered this proposition. He was more than half-convinced that the man

was telling the truth, but he was in no mood to be careless.

"Very well," he said, "I shall release you, Toogli of the Bushongo, but I warn you if you make one false move I shall surely kill you. Broad shouldered you are, and powerfully built, but I am Ki-Gor, and you would not have the slightest chance against me."

"Well do I believe that, Bwana Ki-Gor," Toogli answered promptly, "and, therefore, you will see that I shall not make one false move. For you must be shown that I am of the Brotherhood and thus your friend."

Ki-Gor gazed unwinkingly at the Bushongo for a moment, and then without warning, he released his grip on the black wrists and sprang to his feet. He stepped back a pace warily and held his knife ready, but Toogli made no move to get up from the ground. Instead, he raised his left arm cautiously until Ki-Gor could see the tiny dog's head outlined in the raised ridges of Congo tattooing. Ki-Gor nodded with a faint smile.

"It is good," he said, "Let us go away from this path, some distance to one side."

He turned and pressed through the undergrowth. It never occurred to him to apologize to Toogli for having attacked him, and Toogli in his turn did not expect an apology. In the jungle, the law of self-preservation rules all conduct.

AFTER a little, Ki-Gor swung himself into the low boughs of a mowana tree, and the Bushongo followed him.

"Very well," Toogli began, "I drew a picture of two leopard head's over a human foot-print. That was to tell you that the Leopard Society has found your spoor and is hunting you."

"Yes, I understood that," Ki-Gor replied. "Since then I have seen the Leopard men and they have seen me."

"O, beware of them, Bwana Ki-Gor!" Toogli said energetically, "They are fiends incarnate! They prey on all humans in these accursed mountains. The weak among their victims they kill, and the strong ones they sell into slavery—as I tried to tell you with the picture of the hands in chains."

"I read that correctly," Ki-Gor observed, "but the next picture puzzled me —the flat-topped mountain with the rain and the smoke, and the woman on top."

"The flat-topped mountain," Toogli said excitedly, "is where the Leopard Men sell their slaves. It is a Forbidden Place—forbidden to all except the strange people who live on it protected by the Invisible Death that lurks around the foot of it."

"What is the Invisible Death?"

"I don't know, Ki-Gor—no one knows. But when it rains, a thin blue smoke rises out of the barren strip of land around the foot of the mountain, and anyone who tries to cross that strip is seized by the throat by an unseen hand and dies in agony. That strip completely encircles the mountain, thus protecting the strange tribe who live there. For no one but them dares to set foot on that barren land, and even they do not cross it when it rains or even for many days after it has stopped raining."

"Hm!" Ki-Gor frowned, "and yet you say that men are sold into slavery to these people of the mountain. Do not the slaves die when they are dragged across the strip?"

"For some reason they don't," Toogli replied. "Most likely the people of the mountain have a special *ju-ju* which they can use to protect the slaves against the Invisible Death."

"It's very strange," Ki-Gor commented, "and I would like to know more about it. Why did you draw a picture of a woman on top of the mountain?"

"The people of the mountain, as I have said, are very strange, and they are ruled by a queen. A young woman, they say, but she is absolute master of the tribe. If you remember, I drew her picture half black and half white. That was to show that she and her tribe are not pure-blooded Bantu. They look as if they might have some white blood in them. Certainly their language is not like any Bantu that is spoken around here. They have odd names, too. This queen is called, Rina, and the name of the tribe is, Vnetse."

Ki-Gor smiled. "O Toogli, how did you manage to gather so much information? And why do you act in such a friendly manner to me?"

"I found out the story of the Forbidden Mountain by secretly following the Leopard Men around, and listening, un-

seen, to their talk. Right now, they are very excited, because Queen Rina of the Vnetse has told them she wants many slaves very soon. Therefore, anyone who lives in this region is in grave danger of them. And I am friendly to you, O Ki-Gor, because I am of the Brotherhood of the Dog. We Brothers of the Dog hate the Leopard Society, and when, a few days ago, a young *ju-ju* doctor called Kainya came through the Bushongo country and told me that you had saved him from the Leopard Men, I conceived that it was the duty of all the Brethren of the Dog to lend you assistance at all times. I had been in this region before and knew of its dangers, so I decided to come in and warn you about them. That is all."

KI-GOR looked steadily at Toogli for several seconds. Finally he said, "For your friendliness, Toogli, all thanks. But Kainya, himself, warned me of the Leopard Men and I disregarded him. Perhaps, after all, he and you are right, and possibly I should go away to some place less dangerous. But in any case, you have fulfilled any obligation you may think the Brotherhood owes me, and now you should avoid further danger to yourself and go back to your own country."

"Bwana Ki-Gor," said Toogli, "The Brotherhood is the most ancient of all the societies and the most loyal. Even though you release me from my errand, I would not be happy to go away from here if I thought you were going to stay on in the face of danger."

"It may be that I shall not stay," Ki-Gor replied. "I came to this place to live in peace and quiet, and I am no foolhardy stripling who lingers in the face of danger without a good reason."

"Spoken wisely," Toogli declared. "Let me make a proposal, Bwana Ki-Gor. When I left home, my brother, Chowanda, said that if I did not return after a certain number of days, he was going to come looking for me. I told him that if I had not returned home, I would be at a certain place on a certain day, and he could meet me there. Now, the day is tomorrow, and the place is a little hilltop about a mile from your caves. So, tomorrow I will meet Chowanda at that place, and if you and your woman will also come to the place, we will all four journey together out of this accursed region."

Ki-Gor waited a long time before answering. Toogli had made an excellent impression on him. He appeared to be honest, he spoke fairly, and he was a Brother of the Dog. His motive in coming to that perilous district seemed to be completely unselfish. And yet Ki-Gor could not help wondering a little. Could Toogli have some private, selfish reason for wanting Ki-Gor to leave that region? It was possible. Ki-Gor decided to reserve judgment.

"If my woman and I," he said abruptly, "are not at your hilltop by sundown tomorrow, it will mean that we have decided not to go with you."

"It is well," Toogli replied, "I do not know exactly when my brother will come —whether it will be early morning or late evening. I hope it will be early and I hope you and your woman will come early, because I am getting a great dread of this place. I feel that I should go away before something happens."

On that uneasy note, Ki-Gor parted with Toogli and headed homewards. He felt gloomy and frustrated, himself, without quite knowing why. He wondered if possibly the weather had something to do with his mood. It had been exceptionally sultry and still all day. It was ferociously hot, and yet the sun had been veiled by a thin layer of clouds. Nowhere did a breath of air so much as stir a leaf. Now and then a distant rumble of thunder emphasized the silence that hung over everything. It was an appalling, nerve-wracking silence —the stillness of a world that was waiting for something to happen.

And happen it did, before Ki-Gor was halfway home.

It was a brief and not very violent earthquake. But although Ki-Gor had experienced temblors before, he was still profoundly disturbed. When the very earth trembled and heaved under his feet, Ki-Gor always felt completely helpless. It was one occasion when his tremendous physical self-confidence deserted him. He weathered the quake safely, clinging grimly to a tree trunk, and after it was all over he redoubled his speed in order to get back to the cliffs before sundown.

One thing the earthquake did to him,

and that was to make up his mind that he and Helene would leave that section of Africa the next day, whether they went by themselves or in company with Toogli and his brother.

IT was still daylight when he arrived under the cliff, but the late afternoon sun had disappeared behind a great bank of blue-black clouds with menacing coppery edges, and thunder muttered in the distance. Ki-Gor started to call up to Helene to let down the elevator for him, when it suddenly occurred to him that the quake might have made the elevator insecure and dangerous to use by perhaps dislodging the logs at the cave mouth which the big pulley was fastened to. So he climbed the great tree and swung across on the long vine.

He paused at the cave mouth and inspected the elevator in the dim light of the fading day. The log-braces seemed to be firm enough. Apparently the earthquake had not budged them out of position or even worked them loose. Ki-Gor stood up with a satisfied grunt. Suddenly it occurred to him that the cave was terribly quiet. He wondered what Helene was doing.

"Helene," he called.

There was no answer.

A tiny shaft of alarm went across his mind. He walked through into the next cave. There was barely light left to see his way around.

Helene was not in the next cave. Nor was she in the one beyond that. Ki-Gor fought down a mounting panic within himself. He told himself that Helene must be in one of the caves. She was probably asleep somewhere, he reasoned, there was no occasion for alarm.

But the little cave that Helene used for a bedroom was empty.

Ki-Gor wondered whether she had disregarded his warning again and gone down to the ground. Then he realized that she couldn't have, because the ropes and both buckets of the elevator were up on the shelf in front of the main cave mouth. Ki-Gor put his hand to his forehead and found that he was trembling.

She *must* be all right, he told himself—what could happen to her?

There were two caves left that he had not looked into, the kitchen and the Lookout. The Lookout! Of course! Ki-Gor almost said it out loud. He turned and ran to the hole which led up to the opening higher up on the cliff that they had called the Lookout.

There was a heap of shaly rubble lying underneath the hole and Ki-Gor went cold all over. The earthquake must have jarred the shale loose and a some of it had been kocked down. Something *could* have happened to Helene!

He scrambled up the hole to the Lookout. There was no sign of Helene.

Muttering to himself, Ki-Gor half-slid, half-dropped down the hole. There was just one more place that Helene could be and that was the little cave they used as a kitchen.

That's where she is—she *must* be there, Ki-Gor mumbled to himself, and she's all right! She's perfectly all right!

He landed heavily on his feet at the bottom of the hole, and went swiftly through the connecting caves toward the kitchen. A frightful premonition was clutching at his heart.

At the doorway to the kitchen he paused and an agonized moan escaped his lips.

There was just enough light to see that where there had been a narrow fissure in one corner of the ceiling—the chimney—there was now a gaping hole three feet wide. And underneath it was a huge pile of rubble and shattered rock.

"She was sitting there—when the earthquake came!" Ki-Gor whispered, "and the rock shifted along the crack—and—and it all fell down on her. She is under that pile of rock now—and she's—she's dead! My Helene! *Helene is dead!*"

Ki-Gor's voice broke. He stared unbelievingly at the hideous, life-crushing pile of rock. Sweat gathered in little beads on his forehead, and a wave of nausea went over him. Slowly, mechanically he moved toward the mound of rock. It was nearly as high as his shoulders. His mind almost numb, Ki-Gor calculated that the earthquake had come more than two hours—almost three hours before. Even if Helene had not been killed outright, he reflected, she could not have lived long with that weight of rock crushing her tender body. Certainly, it was not possible that she could be still alive at that moment. And yet—!

IF by some miracle—Ki-Gor snatched at the straw—if by some impossible miracle, there was still a spark of life remaining—why then! he must hurry! He must work frantically to pull down that great heap of rock and rubble! He must get to the bottom of it and release that poor, mangled body—!

With a hoarse cry, the jungle man sprang forward and clawed at the rocks on the top of the pile. Furiously, he threw them behind him and reached for more, his lips drawn tight across his teeth. Tears streamed down his cheeks and a wild-animal whimper rose in his throat as he tore at the rock pile in a blind frenzy. His powerful shoulders heaved and his arms worked like pistons.

"Oh, Helene!" he sobbed, "it's too late! I know it! You are dead—but—I've got to try—!"

The cave soon filled with a fine dust, and his hands got wet and slippery from his blood, but still Ki-Gor worked on, desperately shifting the rock pile. He cursed himself for ever leaving Helene by herself. In the future he would never leave her side for any reason whatever. Then he groaned. He knew that when he got to the bottom of that mound, that he would find her dead. But he attacked the rocks with renewed savagery, because there was just the chance—

Ki-Gor clung to the hope. He dared not even think about life without Helene. To be alone now, after the happiness that had been his—it was unthinkable. He groaned, and made a swift resolve that if he found her dead, he would throw himself off the cliff seeking a merciful death for himself.

Night descended outside before he had reduced the pile by half, but he still struggled on, reeling and gasping, in the total darkness within the cave. His groping hands eventually closed over the edge of a huge slab of rock. It was so wide that even his great arms could scarcely span it. He gave it a tentative heave, but could not even budge it. Then he flung his weight at the great block and it moved barely an inch.

Ki-Gor slumped down on his knees, panting. His last hope was dead now. Helene could not possibly have survived with the weight of such a rock on top of her. He bent his head and stared wide-eyed into the darkness.

It was all over.

It gradually began to dawn on him that the darkness was lifting a little. Some rays of light were filtering into the cave from somewhere. Ki-Gor looked around him in bewilderment. He could not for the life of him figure out where the light could be coming from. Yet light there was—he could begin to make out the outlines of the rock pile in front of him. A peculiar, flickering glow was all around him.

Ki-Gor blinked uncomprehendingly Then he knew. He was going out of his head. The shock of Helene's fate had been too much for him, and he was beginning to imagine things. Then he heard a voice calling, and his skin crawled.

"Ki-Gor."

It was Helene's voice.

Ki-Gor was less than ordinarily superstitious. He had trained himself all his life to seek a rational explanation for any strange phenomena. But on this occasion, he was convinced that there was no rational explanation. That was Helene's voice, therefore she was calling to him from the Other World.

"Ki-Gor."

He opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came.

"Is that you down there, Ki-Gor?"

The light was flickering more brightly in the cave. Suddenly Ki-Gor's mind woke up with an electric shock. Was it possible? Could Helene—? *Where was that light coming from?*

"Ki-Gor! Answer me! You'll have to help me down, I've got a torch in one hand and O'Brien in the other."

Ki-Gor jerked his head back and stared straight upward. The flickering light was being reflected down from the hole in the ceiling of the cave. And ten feet up the hole, Helene's face peered down at him.

"This O'Brien is a little devil," she scolded. "He found the hole right after the earthquake and went scooting up into it. I called him for hours and he wouldn't come, so finally, I just had to light a torch and go after him. I had to crawl miles along—"

"Helene!"

Ki-Gore's voice finally came out, a

strangled sob. Helene was alive! She had not been under the pile of rocks at all—she was alive!

"WHY, what on earth have you been doing?" said Helene, "What's that on your hands—why they're bleeding!"

"Yes—never mind—"

Ki-Gor's throat choked up and he could not say anything more. He stood up under the hole and held up his arms. His eyes were swimming so, that he could hardly see Helene. Carefully she climbed down the hole to where he could reach up and take her by the ankles. Then ever so gently, he let her down to the rock-strewn floor of the cave.

"There!" Helene exclaimed breathlessly, and then she stared about her. "What in the world *have* you been doing? Why, you've moved half that pile of debris! What did you do that for?"

She got a good look at Ki-Gor's face then, and comprehension dawned.

"Oh! Ki-Gor!" she said, aghast. "You thought—I was—was under there?"

Ki-Gor nodded dumbly. Then he laid his head against Helene's breast. And for the first time in his life, Ki-Gor cried, and cried like a baby.

Later, after Ki-Gor had washed the blood and grit away, and sat down to a cold meal with Helene, he heard the explanation and it was perfectly simple. Helene had been asleep in her "bedroom" when the earthquake occurred. She woke up in the middle of it and heard the crash and roar as the ceiling of the kitchen-cave fell in. A few moments later she walked in to look at the damage with O'Brien riding on her shoulder. The little monkey jumped down, sniffed the newly-made pile of rock, looked up, saw the hole, leaped up into it and was off.

Finally she had climbed up into the hole herself with a torch to try and find her pet. The earthquake had done its job thoroughly, having widened the kitchen chimney from a six-inch crack to a passageway over three feet wide. Helene had no difficulty crawling up into it. The passage was vertical for only a few feet, after which it bent sharply to one side and thereafter sloped uphill very gradually. Helene could not estimate how far she went, nor could she see anything in the passageway beyond the light shed by her torch.

Ki-Gor shuddered. "Oh, Helene!" he said, shaking his head. "Suppose another earthquake had come along while you were up there. You would have been—"

"Oh, stop, now! Helene smiled, "I'm alive and well, and hale and hearty, and sitting in front of you to prove it—"

"Well, anyway," Ki-Gor interrupted, a look of steely determination in his eyes, "we are going to go away from here tomorrow as soon as the sun comes up. There is too much evil around here. We will go and meet Toogli and go with him to the Bushongo country."

"Toogli?" Helene frowned. "Who is he?"

Ki-Gor told her, and went on to relate everything that Toogli had said about the Forbidden Mountain, and the Invisible Death, and the queer tribe called the Vnetse and their Queen.

"What do you suppose the Invisible Death is?" Helene asked.

"I don't know," Ki-Gor shrugged, "The Bantu call it *ju-ju*. I don't believe in *ju-ju*, but I saw the place where the Death lurks, and it has an evil look, a barren strip of land full of queer-shaped rocks."

"The only explanation I can think of," Helene pondered, "is that there is natural gas of some kind around there. But I don't see what rain would have to do with it."

Ki-Gor did not know about natural gas, therefore Helene's conjecture meant nothing to him. Characteristically, he dismissed the problem from his mind, determining to solve it at some other time when he gathered more details about it. He spent a half hour or so going over his supply of arrows very carefully, and then curled up in a corner and went to sleep.

THE next morning, Ki-Gor rose before sunup and moved quietly about the caves preparing for the departure. Early as it was, the heat was already beginning to be oppressive. It promised to be another sultry, brazen day like the one before, with menacing thunder-clouds lining the horizon.

The combination of the weather and the necessity for abandoning the caves in the cliff put Ki-Gor into a gloomy, apprehen-

sive mood. He hated to leave the caves. They were, by far, the best dwelling place he had ever found in Africa, and it went against his grain to be forced out of them by the threat of sinister, shadowy enemies.

He began to wonder how much he should depend on Toogli, the Bushongo. Toogli carried the tattoo mark of the Brotherhood of the Dog under his arm, which fact was in itself a mark of reliability. His personality, too, was frank and open. And yet Ki-Gor could not help wondering whether Toogli might be playing a deeper game, and using the name of the Dog Brotherhood to scare Ki-Gor away from that region for reasons of his own. What those reasons might be, Ki-Gor could not even guess, but he felt that it was quite possible that there might be reasons.

Ki-Gor would never have survived the hazards of the jungle and grown to splendid maturity if he had not early developed a good-sized bump of skepticism. And now, under the existing circumstances, Ki-Gor's skepticism began to work a little overtime.

As the pale sunlight, filtering through layers of heat haze, struck on the tree-tops below, Ki-Gor decided to leave the caves for a quick trip to the hilltop that Toogli had designated as a meeting-place. It was not far away, and Ki-Gor calculated that he could get there, look over the situation carefully for any possibilities of treachery, and be back again before Helene woke up. In one way, it went against him—after yesterday's dreadful experience—to leave Helene alone again, but he reasoned that he would not be gone long, that he would, in fact, probably be back within an hour.

He picked up his bow and slung his quiver of arrows over his shoulders and went to the elevator. He was just preparing to let himself down the face of the cliff when Helene's voice interrupted him.

"Ki-Gor! Where are you going without me?"

He started guiltily. "I won't be gone long," he protested. "I just thought I'd go and see if everything is all right—see if Toogli is a true man—"

"Oh, Ki-Gor, let me come with you, please! I hate to be always left behind as if I were a silly little child. I think you forget that I've learned a lot about the jungle since I first met you. I'm getting to the point where I can take care of myself, I think."

"I know you can, Helene," Ki-Gor answered patiently, "and I would take you but—well, just in case there is some danger, I'd rather you were safe up here."

"Safe up here," Helene sniffed, "unless I get crushed in an earthquake."

Ki-Gor winced, but Helene went right on.

"No, I think I've earned the right to be beside you in the face of danger, Ki-Gor. Why, think of the tight spots we've been in together before now—when I didn't know nearly so much about the jungle as I do now. Maybe I can't travel the tree route as well as you can, and perhaps I can't run as fast, but I've learned to be alert for danger, and to use my head in an emergency. How do you know but what I might even be a help to you rather than a liability?"

Ki-Gor sighed. He knew Helene well enough to tell that when she shook her red curls that way and lifted her pointed jaw up like that, that there was very little use in trying to persuade her into doing what she did not want to do. He helped her into the elevator bucket.

O'Brien, and Shuba, the milch-goat, were left behind in the caves. Ki-Gor explained to Helene that after they joined Toogli, their route would undoubtedly take them past the caves again, and they could stop and pick up the two pets and take them along with them. On the reconnaissance trip that they were now making, the monkey and the goat would only be in the way.

HELENE lived up to her boast that she could now take care of herself. Ki-Gor moved swiftly northward through the semi-jungle, eyes and ears alert, and Helene kept up with him easily, her long brown legs pacing tirelessly beside his. As the trees began to thin out a little, Ki-Gor stopped frequently and climbed up into some of them to make sure of his direction. He remembered, in a general way, the hilltop that Toogli had told him about, and where it was. But Ki-Gor did not intend to blunder onto the place. His idea was to locate it from a distance, and then either sneak up on it or observe it from a distance in a tree-top.

However, as he poked his head through

the top-foliage of one tree, he found that he had unwittingly come closer to his destination than he realized. The hilltop was hardly two hundred yards away.

It could not really be called a hill, since it was merely a slight rise in the grassy parkland. But Ki-Gor knew it was the right place. He recognized the three trees on top that Toogli had told him about and the row of bushes and small trees that went up one side like the mane of a zebra.

Ki-Gor stared at the three trees for several minutes, and then became conscious of a vague uneasiness within himself. There was no sign of life around the little hill, and yet Ki-Gor had a feeling that something was wrong. He looked below him down the tree and saw Helene sitting safely on a branch. He looked around in all directions and then turned his gaze back on top of the hill. Nowhere could he see a sign of danger, and yet he felt a decided premonition that all was not quite well.

Ki-Gor sighed. He knew that if he could see no danger but still could sense its presence about him, that his intuition was speaking to him, warning him. And Ki-Gor had long since learned to have a high respect for his intuition.

Finally, something made him glance upward, and what he saw caused him to exclaim wordlessly. Three vultures, high up in the fiery haze of the sky, were wheeling downward in great circles. Ki-Gor watched them come down, down, straight to the three trees on the top of the little hill. As the great birds landed, flapping awkwardly, and disappeared in the tall grass, Ki-Gor muttered a word to Helene, and scrambled down the tree after her.

With a warning to Helene to follow him as silently as possible, he led the way to the row of bushes and small trees that marched up the hill. Using these bushes for cover, the jungle man and his mate crept noiselessly up toward the three trees. So carefully did they go that they were within ten feet of the first vulture, before the great creature gave a startled croak and sprang into the air, black wings flapping ponderously. The other two quickly followed suit and went up to roost in one of the trees, glaring down at the intruders.

Ki-Gor pushed through the coarse grass, and a moment later stood over the frightfully mangled corpse of a black man.

He examined the body thoughtfully. It had once been Toogli.

"Good heavens!" Helene exclaimed, looking over Ki-Gor's shoulder. "Isn't that sickening! Ugh! Do you know who it was?"

Ki-Gor told her, and Helene felt a thrill of dismay go through her.

"What do you think killed him?" she said, anxiously. "Leopards?"

Ki-Gor shook his head.

"Leopard Society," he said grimly. "There were many of them and they used those cruel iron claws."

He walked past Toogli's broken body to a partially demolished *boma* which enclosed a blackened place on the ground where there had been a small camp-fire.

"Yes, plenty of tracks," Ki-Gor observed, pointing to the ground, "and not leopard tracks. He was alone, I think, and they surprised him. Poor Toogli; I'm sorry I ever doubted him. He was a true man, and he died just to come into this evil country and warn us to leave it. He was so true that I couldn't believe it."

Ki-Gor's hands were opening and closing convulsively, and his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Didn't you say," Helene asked, "that his brother was coming here to meet him today?"

"Yes," Ki-Gor answered, still glaring down at the dead coals of the camp-fire. "His brother, Chowanda, will be here some time today. What a sad thing for him to find! I think we will bury Toogli, and leave a message for Chowanda."

HALF an hour later, Ki-Gor filled in the shallow grave, and dragged a large flat stone over and placed it on top of it. Then he picked a charred stick of wood out of the fireplace and squatted down beside the stone. Helene, peering over his shoulder, watched him make a series of crude drawings on the smooth gray surface of the stone. Ki-Gor's technique was by no means as proficient as the unfortunate Toogli's, but the figures he drew were nevertheless recognizable.

First, he drew a dog lying on its side, mouth open and legs stiff in the attitude of death. Around that, four rough circles with rounded ears and spots represented leopard heads. Then a trail of human

footprints led to a representation of a flat-topped mountain.

"The Forbidden Mountain!" Helene breathed.

Ki-Gor nodded, his face still set in its grim lines. The hand holding the piece of charcoal hesitated a moment, and then outlined a crude profile of a white man. It was Ki-Gor's idea of himself, not particularly flattering, but it showed that he had a high-bridged nose, and longish, straight hair. Under the head, he finally drew a bent bow with an arrow notched in the string.

"What does the bow and arrow mean?" Helene asked.

"That means that Ki-Gor is at war with the Leopard Society," Ki-Gor replied, standing up. "Come, we are going to the Forbidden Mountain."

Helene regarded him with round eyes. "Isn't that just what Toogli risked his life to tell you not to do, Ki-Gor?"

"There will be danger," Ki-Gor said darkly, "but I am Ki-Gor—I will not let a friend go unavenged."

"Oh, I know," said Helene fearfully, "I know how you feel, but just the same—Tell me, why did they kill Toogli? Why didn't they sell him into slavery?"

"Because the Leopard Society hates the Brotherhood of the Dog. The Brotherhood is much older and much widerspread. It is really more powerful, or it would be if the Brothers were cruel like the Leopard men. But the Brotherhood stands for peace among men, and that's why the Leopard Society hates it and makes war on it all the time."

"But Ki-Gor, why don't you wait, then, until Chowanda comes, and maybe he can gather some Dog Brothers to help you fight the Leopard men. I don't like the idea of your going single-handed against those blood-thirsty creatures."

"Chowanda may not get here for hours yet," Ki-Gor replied, "and by the time he got help, this trail would be cold. Don't be afraid. We will overtake these Leopard men today, and make them pay for killing Toogli."

During the next three hours, there were times when Helene almost wished she had not been so boastful about her ability to keep up with Ki-Gor. He maintained a terrific pace westward on the Slaver's Road, and often the transplanted daughter of civilization found herself hard-pressed to stay with her vengeful mate. When he finally began to slow down, she almost cried out for relief. Ki-Gor threw her a sharp glance and took her by the wrist and drew her down beside the path.

"Rest a little and get your breath back," he whispered. "A little way from here, there is another path to the left that goes to the Barren Ground at the foot of the Forbidden Mountain. I think we will find that the Leopard Men have taken that path, and we may find them there. So, we'll leave the main path here and cut through the jungle. But we must go very, very quietly."

The jungle growth was not too thick to penetrate, but it made for slow going, especially when it was necessary to be extremely quiet. After several hundred yards of this, Ki-Gor held up his hand. Helene thought she heard human voices and her skin prickled. Ki-Gor went on a little distance and stopped again. Then he beckoned to Helene and motioned her to peer around a great banana bush. She moved one of the great broad leaves and gasped.

They were almost on the edge of the barren strip that Ki-Gor had told her about. Helene was fascinated with its appearance. It looked to her like certain parts of the American West—the Painted Desert or Bryce Canyon. The brilliant yellow of the soil, the grotesque shapes of the eroded rocks, gave the strip an evil beauty that repelled as it fascinated.

Ki-Gor tugged impatiently at her wrist and pointed. Then Helene saw the Leopard men.

THERE were a dozen strapping blacks not fifty yards away, squatting on their heels on the edge of the strip. They all wore headdresses made of leopard heads, the skins trailing down their backs. Most remarkable of all, however, was the fact that they were talking to a white man.

Putting his mouth to Helene's ear, Ki-Gor said, "You stay here until I come back. I am going closer to hear what they are saying."

With that he glided off down the edge of the barren strip, keeping covered by the undergrowth. As he crawled nearer to the *indaba,* he began to be able to distinguish

words. The language being used was the M'pongwe trade dialect, but even so, Ki-Gor thought the white man's voice sounded familiar. It was a throaty, harsh voice, and the man's delivery was peremptory and arrogant. Ki-Gor racked his brains trying to recall where he had ever heard that voice before.

Using all his consummate skill in stalking, Ki-Gor crept within twenty feet of the gathering to a broad-leafed bush. This served as a screen through which he could see perfectly without being seen.

"So then," the white man was saying, "two hundred strong slaves as fast as you can deliver them. The Queen of the Vnetse will pay double the old price—remember, double! And, in addition to that, I, myself, will pay an extra sum for each slave."

The white man's back was toward Ki-Gor, but even so, the jungle man was beginning to place his voice. In another minute, he thought, he would surely remember exactly who the man was.

"Very well, get to work, Men of the Leopard Society," the white man said, bringing the *indaba* to a close. "Bring in your slaves and you will be richer than you ever dreamed you would be."

The Leopard men rose to their feet chattering.

"We will bring you fine slaves, Bwana," they boasted, "two hundred of them very soon. And you will make us rich, because you are a rich, powerful bwana. We will bring you one slave for whom you will pay us thrice and four times over. He is a man, we think, but he is not a Bantu. Rather is he like a great white ape that swings through the trees. He is big, even bigger than you, Bwana, and very cunning, but we will catch him and you will see what a prize we bring you."

"A white ape, you say?" the white man said sharply.

"Aye, an ape or a man," the Leopard men answered vaguely, "we are not sure which. But we will catch him and bring him to you."

The Leopard men drifted down the path toward the Slaver's Road, and the white man stared after them in thought. Abruptly, he turned around, and Ki-Gor remembered then where he had heard this man's voice before.

It was the man who called himself Cornel ten Broeck on some occasions, and at other times called himself Colonel Bauer. He was a big, square-faced, square-figured man with pale hair and eyes, and he had had something to do with the attempted uprising of the West African tribes against the French and British colonial governments a few months before. The tribes had leagued together under the name of the Confederacy of Simba—a purely African idea—but Ki-Gor knew that agitators had gone around to the tribes to arouse them, and he knew that this man, Colonel Bauer, had furnished the money to pay those agitators.

Now, here he was, urging the vicious, cruel Leopard men to go out and enslave their fellow-Africans. The more Ki-Gor saw of men of his own color, the more dubious he sometimes became of them. As to this Colonel Bauer, Ki-Gor found some satisfaction in the thought that the man was not English, like himself, but belonged to a tribe called Germans.

Ki-Gor smiled to himself as he thought how startled Bauer had been when the Leopard men had told him of the "white ape." Bauer had seen Ki-Gor once. And on that occasion Ki-Gor had dropped out of a tree in front of him, and then had quickly escaped into the jungle. That had been back in Nigeria, so it must have been considerable of a shock to the German to hear that Ki-Gor was down in this country. Ki-Gor crouched behind his bush patiently, waiting to see where the big white man was going.

BUT before Colonel Bauer went anywhere, he had something to do first. A canvas bag was slung on a strap over the German's right shoulder. As Ki-Gor watched him, he reached into the bag and pulled out an odd-looking object, which he took in both hands and slipped over his head. To Ki-Gor's intense astonishment, the object turned out to be a mask of some kind.

The jungle man was quite familiar with masks of all varieties; the elaborate ones worn ceremonially by the M'pongwe and the M'Fang, and the curiously life-like ones made by the Dan and the Mossi farther north. But he had never seen a white man wear a mask, nor had he ever seen a mask

of the design of the one the German had just put on. It had cavernous, ghastly eyes, and between them an appendage very much like a miniature elephant's trunk. It was very puzzling to Ki-Gor. He gazed intently at the German, awaiting his next move. It was not long in coming. Colonel Bauer, his face completely hidden by the grotesque mask, turned on his heel and strode straight into the Barren Ground where the Invisible Death lurked.

Ki-Gor craned his neck incredulously after the German. How did he dare walk so boldly across that dangerous strip of land? Was the strange mask a protective *ju-ju* against the Death? All of Ki-Gor's skeptical instincts rebelled at the idea. He clung to the belief that every mystery had a rational explanation—even the Invisible Death. And his experiences with masks had taught him that they were merely ritualistic facial costumes and could never bring real protection from any actual danger to their wearers. If Colonel Bauer could walk safely across the Barren Ground, Ki-Gor reasoned, then there could be no real danger there. He waited until the German had passed out of sight around a great eroded boulder, then he stood up silently. He intended to follow Colonel Bauer and find out where he was going.

Fifty yards away, Helene had seen the big German put on the mask, and she had, of course, immediately recognized it as a gas-mask. She recalled then that when Ki-Gor had told her about the Invisible Death, she had guessed it was probably a poisonous natural gas of some kind. The German's action, of course, confirmed that guess.

Her eyes followed the big man in the white uniform out of sight, and she sighed with relief. Now, perhaps Ki-Gor would be contented to give up his dangerous errand. Then she saw him move out of the jungle and start across the arid strip. An icy hand closed over her heart. Ignorant of the danger, he was walking straight into a horrible death from poisonous gas!

She had to stop him—somehow!

But how could she? By the time she ran up to him, it might be too late. Without a moment's hesitation, Helene lifted her voice in a piercing scream.

"Ki-Gor! No! Come back!"

She was running toward him, tears of terror in her eyes, her mouth babbling incoherent warnings. Ki-Gor stood transfixed with horror for a second, then he dashed toward her, gesturing desperately to keep quiet.

But Helene had only one idea in her head and that was to get him off that barren ground.

"Helene!" Ki-Gor barked frantically. "Quiet!"

They were almost up to each other now, and he motioned violently to turn and run into the undergrowth. A shot rang out and a bullet whined over their heads.

"Stand still, or I'll shoot to kill!"

Out in the arid strip, the big man in the gas-mask faced them, automatic leveled in his fist.

Ki-Gor obeyed, a look of sullen defiance on his bronzed face. Helene stumbled closer to him, weeping.

"Stand still, I say!" the man in the gas-mask snarled.

Ki-Gor turned to Helene with a reproachful look.

"Helene!" he said.

"I couldn't help it!" Helene sobbed. "If I hadn't, you would have died from the gas."

"Not entirely correct," said Colonel Bauer, strolling toward them. "This mask of mine is merely an extra precaution. There is very little danger of gas except during or just after a rain."

HELENE stopped crying abruptly, and stared at the big man who continued to level his automatic at them.

"You sound like an Englishman," she said doubtfully, "and if that's the case, you have nothing to fear from us. We were following those Leopard Society men."

"Ah, but I am not English," the big man chuckled. "I am Colonel Bauer of the German Army. I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, madam, but I do remember seeing Ki-Gor once for a brief moment. How amusing that we should meet again, now that our countries are at war with each other."

"What are you going to do?" Ki-Gor said with characteristic bluntness.

"I am not quite sure," the German replied. "Seeing that we are enemies, I would be perfectly justified in shooting you—"

"Oh! you wouldn't!" Helene exclaimed in terror.

"Allow me to finish, madam—I would be politically justified in shooting you, but it would hardly be very sporting, considering that I am armed with an automatic pistol, and you have nothing but a home-made bow and some arrows. Ah, yes! I see you have a knife, too."

"But why should you talk about killing?" Helene demanded. "Ki-Gor is not a soldier. He and I have nothing to do with the war. We ran into you by accident."

"What do you think I should do then, madam? Let you go on your way?"

"Of course," Helene said stoutly.

The German chuckled again.

"You think I should let you go scot-free," he said, "so that you can run to the nearest Allied authorities and tell them that you have met a German officer traveling around Spanish Guinea. Aha! madam, I am afraid not! It would embarrass the Spanish authorities no end, even though they are quite unaware of my presence in their territory. No. Much as I regret it, I am afraid I shall have to intern you two for the duration of the war."

"Intern! What do you mean?" Helene quavered.

"I am on my way to a tribe with whom I have some dealings," the German said, looking at her intently. "You and Ki-Gor will march in advance of me until we reach their outposts. Then I will turn you over to their custody. I don't think they will ill-treat you."

"What tribe?" said Ki-Gor coldly.

"The Vnetse," Colonel Bauer replied with a sleepy smile.

"We are going up the Forbidden Mountain?"

"Precisely."

"That means we'll have to cross the Barren Ground!" Helene exclaimed.

"I assure you there is no danger of gas," said the German. "There will not be until there is rain." He glanced up at the sky. "And I don't think those thunder-clouds will concentrate over us for several hours yet, so we are perfectly safe—Ki-Gor! Please do not make any more sudden movements like that, or I will be forced to put a bullet through your head!"

The German had stepped backward quickly as Ki-Gor had snatched swiftly, but vainly, at the automatic.

"That was very foolhardy of you, Ki-Gor," the German admonished. "Don't try it again. I will not only shoot you but I will also shoot your fair companion. Now, then—both of you—follow this path toward the mountain, and I will come behind you at a discreet distance."

Under the circumstances, there was nothing else to do but obey the German. The strange trio set out on the well-defined path that wound through the grotesquely shaped rocks of the Barren Ground. Ki-Gor was in the lead, head held high, and Helene stumbled along close behind him, on the verge of tears. Lastly, the burly German followed watchfully with drawn gun.

III

HALFWAY across the arid strip, Bauer blew a shrill blast on a whistle, and a few minutes later several extraordinary-looking men appeared on the pathway in front of them. They were slender, willowy men, light brown in color—almost yellow. Their features were more Caucasian than Negro, and their black hair was wavy rather than woolly. But most curious of all were their clothes. They wore short, puffy breeches, loose doublets, and knee-length capes—a costume that to Helene looked strangely like that worn in Europe in the Sixteenth Century.

Colonel Bauer issued some orders to them in the M'Pongwe speech, and they swarmed around Ki-Gor and Helene and clamped heavy chains on them. At that point, Helene burst into tears.

"Oh, Ki-Gor!" she wept. "It's all my fault! If I hadn't screamed, this would never have happened! I was only trying to help you, to save you! I guess I should never have come along. I should have stayed behind."

"Never mind," Ki-Gor said, quite sharply. "This is not bad trouble. We will soon find a way to be rid of these little yellow monkeys, and some time—" he raised his voice and darted a hard glance at Bauer—"some time we will catch that fat ox without his gun, and we will cut him into little pieces."

"First catch your fat ox without his gun,"

the German sneered, his face flushing dark red.

On the other side of the arid strip, a broad path led straight up the steep, densely wooded side of the Forbidden Mountain. A prolonged rumble of thunder caused the Vnetse to wave hysterically and wave their hands at the sky. Ki-Gor heard them tell Bauer in M'Pongwe that it was a good thing they were off the Barren Ground, because at any moment it might start to rain. Then, waving their long iron-tipped spears, they led the way up the mountain.

It was a long, grueling climb, and when, over an hour later, they came to a level clearing, Helene was too exhausted to do anything but drop to the ground, panting. The Vnetse patiently squatted on the ground and chattered among themselves in their curious, rapid, musical speech. After a little while, Helene had rested sufficiently to go on, and got to her feet. She found herself wondering about the Vnetse language. It sounded like no African speech she had ever heard. It was much more musical, more rhythmic. She spoke to Ki-Gor about it, and asked him if he could understand the Vnetse. When he replied that he could not, Colonel Bauer gave a short laugh.

"I am not surprised," said the German. "I can't understand it, in fact, I've never heard anything like it anywhere in Africa, and I have lived in Africa for twenty years, and I can speak more than thirty dialects. Vnetse is certainly not a Bantu language, and it isn't Arabic or Sudanese, or even Bushman. The funny part is, they have some words that sound almost English."

"English!" Helene exclaimed.

"Yes, I can't remember any of them now," said the German, "but what's more, the English-sounding words mean almost the same thing as the English words they sound like. There may be some English blood in the Vnetse from several generations back, I don't know."

Helene plodded along behind Ki-Gor, deep in thought. She remembered Toogli's drawing of the woman on the mountain—half-white and half-black. That would indicate mixed blood, and the Vnetse certainly were not Negro. She listened carefully to the Vnetse warriors, but she could not distinguish any words that sounded English to her. The language, although spoken very rapidly, was extremely rhythmic, and contained a number of broad vowel sounds.

Apparently the flat top of the mountain had been reached, as the two captives and their guards were traveling along level ground. Other Vnetse warriors came up and joined the party, and there was an interchange of triumphant exclamations.

All of a sudden it began to dawn on Helene what the language of the Vnetse sounded like. It was not English, but it was very much like Italian!

HELENE had once spent a year in Rome, studying art, and had learned to speak Italian. The more she listened, now, to these strange yellow men, the more convinced she became that they were speaking some form of Italian to each other. She could easily make out individual words, and pretty soon she found that she could translate whole sentences. It gave her a feeling of triumph, even though she was a prisoner in chains, being taken to an unknown fate. She almost spoke of her discovery to Colonel Bauer, but thought better of it. If she could understand the Vnetse, and he could not, she obviously had an advantage over him which she might be able to use some time.

She edged up nearer to Ki-Gor, hoping to be able to whisper in his ear. But just then, the Vnetse warriors halted, and set up a great shout.

The party was standing on the edge of a great clearing, and both Ki-Gor and Helene rubbed their eyes in amazement at the scene that lay before them.

They were looking at a good-sized village—a village the like of which could be seen nowhere else in Africa. It was no collection of mud huts with roofs of straw thatching, but a group of perhaps thirty buildings, symmetrically arranged in a U-shape around a large open square. The buildings were at least two stories high, and they were made out of whole logs from which the bark had been peeled. Light-colored woods had been used, and the bare logs had bleached in the sun, so that the houses were almost white.

Furthermore, the fronts of all the houses that faced on the square had balconies supported by log pillars. The village of the

Vnetse presented an extremely graceful, un-African appearance.

The reason why the party had halted soon became apparent. From the largest house in the village, far down in the base of the *U*, a chanting crowd of Vnetse warriors issued forth. In their midst, a woman was being borne along on an open litter on the shoulders of four blacks.

"Rina!" Rina!" the crowd shouted as the litter moved down toward the three whites and stopped opposite them. The woman hushed the crowd with an imperious gesture, and Colonel Bauer stepped over beside her.

She was strikingly beautiful in a lean, predatory way. She had large, glistening brown eyes, a thin, prominent nose, and full, curving lips. A low-cut dress of bright red set off the warm brown of her skin, and as she stepped off the litter, the full skirt of the dress fell in graceful folds around her legs.

She stared at Ki-Gor and Helene for a moment, and then turned and talked rapidly in M'Pongwe to Colonel Bauer.

"What is she saying?" Helene asked Ki-Gor under her breath.

"She is saying," Ki-Gor replied with a slight smile, "that we should not be prisoners—we should be friends, guests."

Colonel Bauer was apparently making a sharp answer to the Queen, but it only brought on a torrent of M'Pongwe. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders, and the Queen shrilled a command to her warriors. Immediately, the chains were taken off Helene and Ki-Gor.

The Queen then came forward, eyes glowing, and held her hand out, first to Helene and then to Ki-Gor. Helene felt a tremendous impulse to say something to her in Italian, but thought better of it when she saw that Queen Rina was paying much more attention to Ki-Gor than to herself.

Finally, the dusky beauty turned away with a flourish of her thin arms and reentered her litter. As the crowd shouted again and started in the direction of the village, Ki-Gor murmured to Helene, "She says her house shall be ours, and we shall be her friends."

Colonel Bauer stepped up beside Helene with a wry smile.

"Apparently," he said, "the lady is quite impressed with your looks—too much so to treat you as prisoners. However, I wouldn't count on leaving the Vnetse for some time to come, if I were you—at least, not until the queen is tired of your company."

THE whole chanting barbaric company was winding toward the great square of the village. As they drew nearer to it, Ki-Gor and Helene observed that there was a wide depression, almost a pit, in the center of the square, with a waist-high balustrade of stone around it. In a few minutes, it became apparent that the pit was a miniature arena, sunk fifteen feet below the level of the square. The floor of the arena was sanded, and at each end there was a strong door. And in the exact middle, there was planted in the ground a T-shaped wooden object, which could only be a gallows of some kind.

Queen Rina screamed a command, and her litter was carried to the edge of the arena. Her subjects distributed themselves noisily all around the balustrade and gaped downward expectantly. Colonel Bauer lined up with Helene and Ki-Gor and uttered a cynical chuckle.

"You seem to have made a hit, as the Americans say," he observed. "Apparently, you are to be given some entertainment by way of a welcome."

There was a shout from the crowd, and one of the doors down in the arena opened. Two Vnetse warriors appeared, each dragging a struggling prisoner, and behind them strode an enormous black carrying a murderous-looking nine-tailed whip. The prisoners, wrists bound together, were hauled over to the gallows and their heads thrust into nooses at the end of ropes suspended from each end of the cross-bar. The wretched creatures were stripped to the waist and stood abjectly, awaiting their doom. One of them was a golden-bodied Vnetse man, the other, a stolid black M'Pongwe woman.

There was a moment of awful silence as the huge black with the cat o' nine tails looked upward. The Queen gave a shrill command, and the black brought the terrible whip across the back of the miserable Vnetse. Helene closed her eyes to the brutal scene and Ki-Gor glanced curiously at Queen Rina. Her tan face was contorted into an expression of unbelievable ferocity,

as she shrieked encouragement at the giant executioner.

It was ten minutes before the Queen's blood-lust could be satiated. Her wretched victims could not move to escape the terrible whip without strangling themselves on their rope-halters. Presently they mercifully fainted, and they were carried, bleeding and half-dead, out of the arena. The Queen waved her arms in a passionate sign of dismissal and the crowd dispersed. The litter moved off toward the main building at the base of the *U*, and Bauer touched Helene and Ki-Gor on the arms.

"We are expected to follow our hostess into her wooden palace," he said with an ironical smile.

Helene felt nauseated at what she had just witnessed.

"What were those poor creatures being punished for?" she asked the German.

"Well, you see," he answered, "Rina is sole despot of the Vnetse. Apparently they have always had queens. And it suits her royal pleasure to have husbands, and change those husbands every so often. That man down there was her most recent husband. She was tired of him, so she accused him of infidelity with the M'Pongwe slave-woman and had them both beaten. I have only known the Queen about a week, but I've found that she is like that."

Helene wanted to ask the German what his dealings with the Queen were, but by this time they were passing between the white log columns of the little palace and opportunity for private conversation was limited.

It soon became evident that, although it was still the middle of the afternoon, Queen Rina intended to have a state banquet to entertain her guests. She slipped off her litter, issued a stream of commands and then waved the three whites into a large, high-ceilinged, richly decorated room. The ceiling was arched in a fashion that Helene recognized instantly as Italian Renaissance. The wooden chairs and the large oblong table were beautifully carved in a characteristically Italian manner. Helene shot a glance at Colonel Bauer. She wondered if he was as ignorant as he pretended to be about the origin of the Vnetse. Surely he, a European, would notice the Italian-ness of this strange people. But then, of course, he was an African expert, and he would know that Italy's interest in Africa had been confined to the northern and northeastern sections of the continent. Further speculation on Helene's part was cut short by the entrance of the Queen.

SHE had changed into another dress, made of a flame-colored material so sheer that it was almost transparent. The dress had a full-draped skirt, but above the narrow hips it modeled her lithe torso closely, and the neckline was a deep V between her firm, ivory-colored breasts.

"Ah!" breathed Colonel Bauer. "This is working out beautifully. The Queen, to be very coarse, is stripped for action."

"What do you mean?" Helene said, a sharp fear crossing her mind.

"My dear woman," the German replied, "the Queen is already fascinated with Ki-Gor. Unless I am greatly mistaken, she is contemplating taking him as her next husband."

"Good heavens!" Helene exclaimed, and Ki-Gor turned anxiously at the sound of her voice.

"Careful, careful!" the German warned in a murmur. "I advise you to be very discreet, and do not, by all means, give the Queen the idea that you would stand in the way of her plan."

Ki-Gor was starting across the room, but Queen Rina's voice arrested him. She had swept around the room, followed by six fully armed warriors, and seated herself in a high-backed chair at one end of the great table. Then she spoke imperiously to Ki-Gor and parted her cruel mouth in a dazzling smile. Ki-Gor looked at her shrewdly, then, without a word, went over and sat down beside her in the chair she was pointing to. She made a brief gesture to Bauer and ignored Helene completely. The German gave a dry chuckle and sat down.

"You had better sit down here," he said to Helene, "and be very quiet. Apparently the Queen does not yet consider you a serious obstacle."

Helene sat down, dazed by the sudden turn of events. She had a sudden impulse to cry, and yet she was too frightened to do other than follow the German's advice. Dully she watched a number of black slaves filing in, bearing platters of food. The Queen twisted her wiry body halfway

around in her chair and began talking very animatedly to Ki-Gor in M'Pongwe. Helene, of course, could not understand the conversation, and she could read nothing from Ki-Gor's face. It was completely expressionless. A little panic began to creep over Helene. What was going to happen? What would be the outcome of this extraordinary predicament?

"Ah! It's turning out splendidly," Colonel Bauer murmured. "Ki-Gor will be installed as prince-consort, which means that he will be virtually a prisoner for a considerable time. At least, until my errand here is completed. After that, I don't know what will happen to him, and I'm sure I don't care."

Helene began to shake all over. She made a tremendous effort to control herself.

"Will I—will I be put out of the way?" she asked.

"You mean killed?" The German looked at her coolly. "Oh, no. I will more or less take you under my protection—extend my diplomatic immunity to you. Then, after my job is done here, you may accompany me to the Coast if you like."

Surely, this is some hideous nightmare! Helene told herself. In a minute I must wake up and find Ki-Gor and me safe in the caves in the cliff!

But, Bauer's voice went on softly, suavely, and on the other side of him, Queen Rina jabbered incessantly at Ki-Gor. Helene felt that she had to concentrate on something or she would go mad.

"Colonel Bauer," she said, in a low voice that she hardly recognized as her own, "just what is your errand, your job here?"

"I may as well tell you," the German replied with an insolent smile, "in view of the fact that neither you nor Ki-Gor will be able to get away from here and give me away. I'm after poison gas."

"Poison gas!"

"The barren strip around the foot of the mountain contains an amazing mineral which gives off a deadly gas when it's combined with water. I traveled through this region when I was a young man and heard about the Forbidden Mountain and the Invisible Death. I noticed that the Death struck only during and after a rain. A chemical analysis of the soil of the arid strip revealed the presence of the substance which I named 'Nihilite,' because the gas that is released is so deadly. As soon as Britain treacherously declared war on the Fatherland, I arranged to be sent out here with two cargo-submarines. I am now buying from Queen Rina the right to quarry several hundred tones of Nihilite from the Barren Ground. The stuff is a tremendous weapon, because a small amount of it will produce an enormous quantity of gas. With this gas, my dear Helene, Germany can soon win the War. Two cargo-submarines loaded to capacity with Nihilite will furnish us with the means of utterly destroying all life in London and Paris!"

Helene closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Horror was piled on horror. What could ever be done?

ON his side of the table, Ki-Gor was not so much terrified as perplexed. He had not the slightest idea how to handle this dusky beauty who was announcing to him that he was to be her mate. It was a situation which he had never experienced before. His first impulse had been to tell Queen Rina in the briefest possible manner that what she proposed was impossible.

However, Ki-Gor had seen the demonstration of Rina's savage wilfulness, and he well realized the possibilities, the risks that might be involved in any action that went counter to her wishes. So he wisely refrained from saying anything for a considerable time, and let Rina do the talking. He appeared to be listening to her stream of M'Pongwe words, but, actually, his mind was hard at work considering all the possible courses of action. He sensed the fact that Helene might be endangered if he showed the slightest interest in her, and yet it was almost impossible not to show interest in the one person in the world who meant the world to him.

He did his best to avoid looking at her, and to keep his eyes fixed on Queen Rina's face. Once he shot a swift glance around the room, noting that there were six warriors standing around each of the two doors. But when he looked back at Rina, he caught the quick expression of annoyance that went across her dark face, and he decided to be more prudent, thereafter. However, he tried to listen with one ear to

the low-voiced conversation going on between Colonel Bauer and Helene. He was inwardly disturbed by the tone of it. Helene sounded terribly frightened. Ki-Gor managed to keep from looking in her direction, until he heard her utter a shocked gasp and say, "Oh! You just *couldn't!* You couldn't do such a thing!"

Ki-Gor automatically jerked his head around and stared at Helene. He saw a look of agonized entreaty in her eyes, and he half rose in his chair. Quickly Colonel Bauer rapped out in English, "Don't be a fool. Play up to the Queen, or you and Helene are both lost!"

"Yes, Ki-Gor!" Helene put in. "Play up—"

But it was too late.

Queen Rina was ominously silent when Ki-Gor looked back at her. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she said in M'Pongwe to Ki-Gor, "That woman offends me by her presence. She must go!" She turned her head and shrieked a command in her own language.

The Vnetse hesitated at the bold challenge, and Queen Rina raged at them. Finally, one bolder than the rest, ran at Ki-Gor with his spear. Swift as a lion, the jungle man was off the table-top to meet him. His left hand wrenched the spear from the warrior's grasp, his right hand chopped downward. The yellow man fell as if he had been struck with an ax. Spear in hand, Ki-Gor stood over the inert form and glared at the rest of the warriors.

He felt a surge of triumph within him. Why had he not done this before? These Vnetse were as weak as women! But the cold voice of Colonel Bauer behind him cut in on his triumph.

"Drop that spear, Ki-Gor! And put your hands up!"

Ki-Gor flung a glance over his shoulder and saw the gun in the German's hand.

"You fool!" the German said bitterly. "You're completely upsetting my plans. I intend you to be a prisoner among the Vnetse. If not a voluntary one as Rina's husband, then an *in*voluntary one, with your arms tied behind your back. Do not resist, now. Do not make one move—or I will shoot you down as I would a dangerous animal."

The automatic's ugly snout pointed unwaveringly at Ki-Gor's stomach, and the Vnetse warriors cautiously trussed him securely with strong ropes. Stunned by the sudden turn of events, Ki-Gor was led from the great room, followed by the ferocious laughter of Queen Rina.

Several grinning Vnetse made for Helene, but Bauer waved them away with his gun-hand.

"The woman is mine, O Queen!" he growled in M'pongwe. "I claim her as my reward for subduing the man."

"Take her!" the Queen replied, eyes glittering, "and beat her well if she does not do your bidding!"

SEVERAL minutes later, Helene found herself in another room in the palace, bewildered and stupefied by what had happened. Bauer stood over her with a satisfied smile, and holstered his gun.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said. "This room has been assigned to me for as long as I am here. You will be safe as long as you do not try to leave it. You are my property now, you see. And I must say that I am rather looking forward to your companionship."

The German looked at Helene appreciatively, and Helene wished she could die. It seemed altogether fitting that a prolonged roll of thunder should re-echo fatefully outside. It was the impersonal, implacable voice of Africa speaking.

Helene buried her face in her hands. "What—what will happen to Ki-Gor?" she whispered.

"I don't know, really," the German said cheerfully. "I'm afraid it may go hard with him. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, you know. I think I'll go and see the lady now. Remember what I said—stay here and you are safe, but try to run away from me, and I won't answer for the consequences."

He turned and walked out of the room.

Helene walked around the room in a daze. Was this the end? she asked her-

self. Was she to be separated forever from Ki-Gor, and taken to the Coast as the chattel of this ruthless Prussian? Was Ki-Gor to be slaughtered to satisfy the primitive hate of Queen Rina?

Something snapped in Helene's brain, and the despairing clouds dissolved, leaving her mind crystal-clear. She and Ki-Gor were in appalling danger. If something did not happen soon, Ki-Gor would be killed and she—she would be happier dead. But while there was life, there was hope. Somehow, a way out must be found. Ki-Gor was bound and helpless. That left it squarely up to her. Here, at last, was her opportunity to atone for the blunders she had committed in the past few days. Somehow she must find a way to release Ki-Gor.

Her eyes searched the room. She had to find a knife to cut the ropes the Vnetse had wound around Ki-Gor's arms. An army knapsack lay on the bed. Swiftly Helene dumped it out and went through its contents. There was no knife. The nearest thing to it was a package of safety razor blades. Helen opened it and slipped one of the naked blades into her hand.

Then her eyes lighted on the canvas bag that was hanging by the strap over the back of a chair. Bauer's gas-mask! She snatched up the bag and looked inside. There were two masks! Helene's heart leaped. If she could hide these from Bauer, she might be able to bargain with the German—Ki-Gor's life and freedom and hers for the two gas-masks. She held the bag in her hand and looked around.

There was only one window in the room, and it was just a narrow opening high up on the wall. There was no glass, only a hinged wooden shutter. She pushed the chair over underneath it. By standing on the back of the chair, she could get her elbows on the window-sill. She opened the shutter and looked out onto an appalling sight.

The window was on the front wall of the palace, up under the balcony, and faced out onto the great square of the village. The entire population of the Vnetse was assembled around the arena in dead silence. Night had fallen, and the scene was illuminated by the flickering light of several great bonfires. Just in front of Helene a throne had been set up, and Queen Rina was seated on it, Colonel Bauer standing beside her. But the center of interest was down in the pit.

Ki-Gor was down there, under the gallows. His arms were tightly bound to his sides, and his neck was encircled by a noose.

Helene swayed dizzily at her window and nearly lost her balance. Her left hand clung to the razor blade, and her right shot out to save herself. She stifled a dismayed cry as the strap of the canvas bag slipped out of the fingers of her right hand, and the precious gas-masks dropped silently to the ground outside.

Now, Helene was really in despair. What was she going to do now?

Her anxious glance at the square told her that there was still time to do something. Evidently there were to be some preliminaries before Ki-Gor was executed.

A GROUP of dancers entered the arena and did a solemn figure to the accompaniment of a lone drum. Helene noted mechanically that the rhythm was not the intricate, syncopated 4/4 time of Africa, but the simpler triple time of a European folk-dance. It was a macabre scene. The bonfires shed an eerie, yellow light over the dancers as they went through their hideous dance of death. They passed back and forth and around the bound figure of Ki-Gor, endlessly—until Helene thought she must surely scream out loud.

Suddenly the dance was over, and a single cloaked figure stepped out on the sand of the arena. It was an old man with a curious stringed instrument. He began singing in a loud, cracked voice. But Helene found that she understood his words perfectly. He was undoubtedly the tribal bard, and his song was a sort of epic, the history of the Vnetse tribe.

The old man sang of the origin of the Vnetse, how they once lived far across the sea and were masters of the earth. Then they went out on a great ship, and there was a storm. The ship was wrecked, and the Vnetse, under the leadership of a heroic woman, traveled through the hostile jungle until they came to the Forbidden Mountain. That woman's name was Beatrice—the bard pronounced it in the Italian way—and she became the first queen of the Vnetse. And ever since then the Vnetse

had been ruled by queens, direct descendants of that first Queen Beatrice.

Helene clung to her perch and listened with horrid fascination. She told herself that she should be doing something to rescue Ki-Gor, but what could she do? The gas-masks had fallen out of her hand and were lying below on the ground, and she had counted on them to buy off Colonel Bauer. Suddenly it occurred to her that she might be able to sneak around and recover the masks, and still make her deal with the German. Oh! why had she not thought of that before!

Quickly she closed the window-shutter, climbed down off the chair and moved it back into the middle of the room. Then she walked silently out of the room.

In a few moments, she was at the front entrance of the little palace. She was counting on the fact that everybody in the crowd would be concentrating on the arena, and that she would be able to slip behind them unnoticed, retrieve the gas-masks and run off into the darkness somewhere. Then she would hide the masks and come back and face Colonel Bauer. But, just as she started to edge along the wall of the palace, a shrill cry went up near her.

Six Vnetse warriors ran over, and seized her before she had taken a dozen steps.

Tears of rage and disappointment filed Helene's eyes as she was dragged before Queen Rina and Bauer. She had had a chance to save Ki-Gor, and she had ruined it. It was all over now.

"You little fool!" the Prussian officer said, contemptuously. "Why didn't you obey orders and stay in the room? I can't save you now. Not that I'd want to particularly—you'd probably have been a damned nuisance."

The Vnetse were wildly excited at acquiring a second victim. They screamed with blood-lust, as Helene's wrists were tied behind her. The light of the bonfires colored their faces a deeper yellow, and sudden ashes of lightning, followed by thunder-claps, added to the unbelievable savagery of the scene.

Helene was led down steps to the door of the arena by the huge black with the cat o' nine tails. A high-pitched yell greeted her appearance down below and continued as the noose from the rope at the other end of the cross-bar was tightened around her neck. She cast a despairing look at Ki-Gor. His eyes were flashing blue fire, and his lips were drawn back over his teeth in a ferocious snarl.

There was a sudden hush, as the black stepped back and raised his fearful whip. But before he could bring it down on Helene's back, the silence was cut by a prodigious roar.

"Arrrgh!"

IT was Ki-Gor, concentrating all his strength in one last mighty challenging bellow. The giant black was visibly startled, and Ki-Gor gave a tremendous, mocking laugh. The insolence of the sound astounded the Vnetse.

"O great, fat, she-hippopotamus!" Ki-Gor chanted in M'Pongwe, "O ugly warthog! O clumsy blue-black buffalo!"

The Bantu stared at him in amazement. Ki-Gor followed up his insults.

"Thou art brave enough when Ki-Gor's arms are bound," he jeered. "What if Ki-Gor were free? No gazelle, no jungle mouse could outrun thee."

A wave of laughter went over the crowd of Vnetse, and the Bantu grumbled.

"Come on, Little Pickanniny," Ki-Gor taunted. "Untie these ropes if thou hast the courage, and we'll have a fight. Thou with the whip and thy knife, and I with my bare hands."

A roar of delighted approval went over the Vnetse, and they all looked toward their queen. A grim smile came over Rina's face and she made a sign with her right hand. Three Vnetse warriors ran down into the arena and cut the ropes from Ki-Gor's arms. They sprang away then and leveled their spears.

Ki-Gor walked stiffly around the great Negro, rubbing his arms. The burly black saw his advantage and decided to strike before Ki-Gor could restore the circulation in his arms. Whip upraised, he charged silently at the handicapped white man. Ki-Gor dropped his hands from his throbbing biceps and crouched.

Two paces away from him, the huge black cut downward with the whip. But the cruel lashes never landed. Ki-Gor sprang forward, bending low, dived between the Bantu's spraddled legs, and then thrust his back upward. The giant black flew into the air with a bellow of pain, and

landed with a crash, face downward on the sand. He turned over, writhing and screaming, and a long knife glittered in his right hand. Ki-Gor was upon him like a flash, but the black legs churned desperately and kicked him off. Then for a long five seconds, the two men crouched on the sand, watching each other.

Helene, sick with excitement as well as apprehension, clenched her fists convulsively. She felt a sharp pain in her left hand, and suddenly recalled that she was still clutching the razor-blade—that it had been undiscovered when the Vnetse tied her wrists together. The quick pain cleared her head, and she realized that even if Ki-Gor won his fight with the great Bantu, he and she would still be in grave danger. She maneuvered the razor blade carefully in fingers that were slippery with blood.

There was a mighty roar from the watching crowd, as Ki-Gor once more sprang. The black's knife flashed downward, but Ki-Gor caught the wrist in a grip of steel. The two men stood chest-to-chest for a long moment, swaying and straining. Then gradually, the Bantu's right arm began to bend backward. Slowly, Ki-Gor forced the knife-hand back, while beads of sweat stood out on the Bantu's forehead. Suddenly the giant black gave a hoarse scream of terror—the knife glittered and plunged into the oily black neck. An admiring sigh went up from a hundred throats, as the huge body sank down onto the sand.

Ki-Gor stepped forward and addressed the queen.

"My freedom, O Queen! I have fought your brute fairly and killed him. Now, release me and my woman! We will go away in peace, and nevermore molest you."

There was a breathless hush as a slow wolfish smile spread over Queen Rina's face. Then she leaned forward and stood up.

"Brave are you," she said, "and strong, O Ki-Gor! You have bought your freedom, and I shall grant it to you. But your woman is yet unpunished. Her I will not release—not until she has endured fifty lashes on her back. And, as you have killed my executioner"—Rina's eyes glittered—"*you*, Ki-Gor, shall whip her!"

Ki-Gor staggered back, aghast.

"Fifty lashes!" the queen repeated. "I will count the blows, O Ki-Gor, and only those blows which are delivered with the full force of your arm will I count. There will be no easement of her punishment."

Ki-Gor turned toward Helene, in his eyes a stricken look.

"What is it, Ki-Gor?" Helene asked, her fingers busy with the razor-blade on the rope binding her wrists. Ki-Gor told her.

"COME close to me, Ki-Gor," Helene whispered. "I have a plan."

Ki-Gor moved across the sand and bent his head down to Helene's face. A moment later, he stepped back from her and stared perplexedly at her.

"Do it, Ki-Gor," Helene urged. "Hurry, or we're absolutely lost. I couldn't live through fifty lashes and the queen knows it."

"But, how can you—"

"Leave it to me," Helene pleaded, "please. Trust me to put it across."

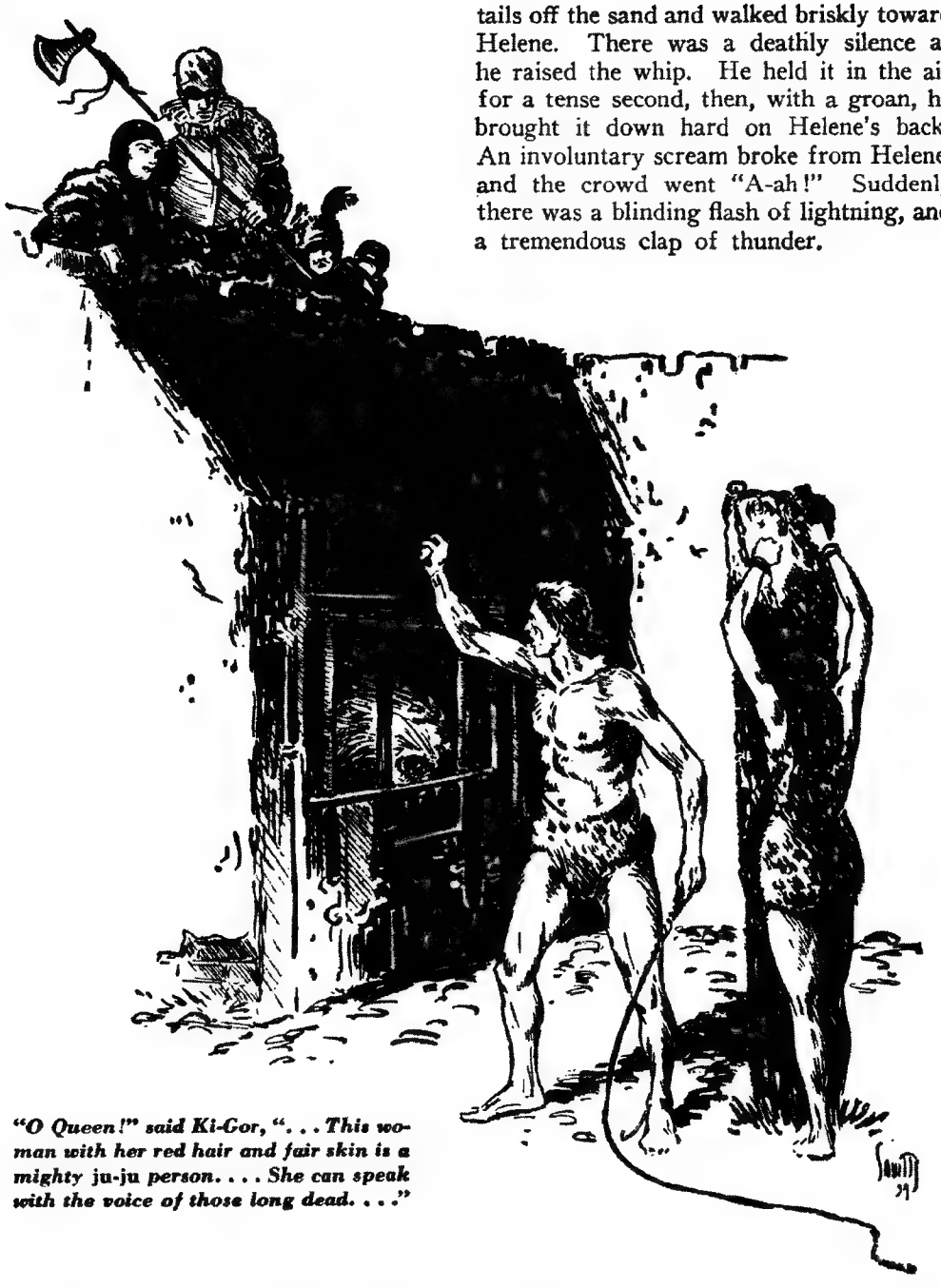
Ki-Gor gave her a long look, then swung slowly around to face the sardonic queen of the Vnetse. Helene's hands were shaking so that she could hardly sever the last strands of rope on her wrists. Vnetse! she thought. Why didn't I think of it before! Of course! Vnetse—Venezi! *Venetians!* These people were descended from a shipwrecked crew of Venetians back in the Sixteenth Century, when Venice was a world maritime power! As Ki-Gor once more addressed the Queen, Helene frantically tried to collect her memories of Venice.

"O Queen!" said Ki-Gor, "I will do your bidding and lash my woman fifty times as you direct. But first I must bring you a warning. This woman with her red hair and fair skin is a mighty *ju-ju* person. She can speak with voices other than her own. She can speak with the voice of a person long dead. I will beat her as you command me to, but at the first stroke of the lash, her spirit will depart from her body and be replaced by a spirit recalled from the dead. Be warned, O Queen. I will lash her, but be prepared to meet the consequences!"

Colonel Bauer leaped up beside Rina, his face distorted with rage.

"What trickery is this?" he demanded loudly in M'Pongwe. "That woman cannot make *ju-ju*. This pair is trying to fool you!"

tails off the sand and walked briskly toward Helene. There was a deathly silence as he raised the whip. He held it in the air for a tense second, then, with a groan, he brought it down hard on Helene's back. An involuntary scream broke from Helene, and the crowd went "A-ah!" Suddenly there was a blinding flash of lightning, and a tremendous clap of thunder.



"O Queen!" said Ki-Gor, ". . . This woman with her red hair and fair skin is a mighty ju-ju person. . . . She can speak with the voice of those long dead. . . ."

"You will find out for yourself, O Queen!" Ki-Gor retorted. "I will beat the woman on her back, and you will see that at the first stroke her hands will become free from the ropes and the blood will pour from her forehead. And even though she cannot speak M'Pongwe or your own language, you will hear from her mouth fateful words."

He bent over and scooped the cat o' nine

By the time the eyes of the Vnetse could focus again, they beheld Helene's hands—miraculously freed—up above her eyebrows. Slowly she took them away, and a frightened gasp went over the crowd as they saw that her forehead was red and glistening.

Then a fateful, hollow voice floated up from the arena—speaking pure Italian!

"O Miserable Venezi! O Wicked Rina!

This is Beatrice speaking—the ghost of your first queen! Beatrice, who was born within sight of the Four Horsemen of St. Marks, far across the water! Beatrice, who led your shipwrecked ancestors to the Forbidden Mountain and ruled them with an iron hand!"

The Vnetse understood every word and immediately went into a wild panic. Helene was ready to go on, recalling incidents in their history which she heard in the bard's epic. But the Vnetse already had had enough. With a despairing shriek, they surged away from the balustrade. The three warriors who were in the arena made a mad dash for the nearest door. They would have slammed it behind them in their desperate fight, but Ki-Gor was there. He wrenched the spear from the last man and held the door open. Helene sped across the sand and through the doorway. A shot rang out above the hubbub, evidence of Bauer trying to stop the stampede.

But when Ki-Gor and Helene reached the top of the stairs to the square, they saw that there was no stopping the panic. The Vnetse were frightened out of their wits by that dreadful, hollow voice—the voice of a woman long dead. They were all imbued with the same idea and that was to get as far as possible from the arena.

HELENE saw Bauer fighting in the midst of the shrieking, howling mob. To add to the confusion, the thunderstorm descended in earnest with dazzling lightning and ear-splitting, crashing thunder. Ki-Gor seized her by the elbow.

"Quick!" he panted.

"No, this way, Ki-Gor!" Helene shouted. "I have to go past the palace."

"But Bauer will see us—"

"I can't help it," Helene cried. "We've got to pick up something."

Ki-Gor looked hard at her, then nodded. "All right."

Together they plunged toward the palace. Bauer was being borne to one side by a frenzied group of Vnetse. He shouted wrathfully as he saw his precious prisoners flying toward the palace, and tried to aim his automatic. But the light was uncertain and the panic-stricken Vnetse kept jostling him, and his shots went wild.

Helene stooped by the wall of the palace and whisked up the precious canvas bag where it was still lying.

"All right!" she cried exultantly to Ki-Gor, holding up the bag. "Let's go!"

A final bullet whined over their heads as they ran down the square past the bonfires toward the outer darkness. At that moment the heavens opened, and a drenching rain descended. The fires behind them hissed and steamed and began to die out. After a few minutes of running, Ki-Gor halted to get his bearings and to let Helene catch her breath. As they stood panting in the pitch darkness, Ki-Gor touched the canvas bag.

"What is that?" he said.

"Gas-masks," Helen replied. "One for each of us. We'll need them to cross the Barren Ground. In this rain the Invisible Death will be striking."

After a significant pause, Ki-Gor spoke, and there was a note of real awe in his voice.

"Helene, your cunning saved us from terrible trouble. After this you will always go with me—wherever I go."

Helene's heart filled. At last she had been a help to Ki-Gor, after trying unsuccessfully so often.

"We must go," Ki-Gor said, "before the Vnetse get over their fright and come after us again. I don't trust that German."

His remarkable sense of direction aided them in picking up the trail which led down the mountain. After that, even though it was pitch dark and pouring rain, they were able to follow the well-worn path without much difficulty. Prudence kept them moving fast so as to remain far ahead of any possible pursuit, and they made a wild dash of it down the steep trail, slogging through the pelting rain. Helene regretted that she had not stolen the electric torch which she had seen in Colonel Bauer's knapsack. It would have been useful enough in this headlong flight. But then, she reflected, she was lucky enough to have picked up the gas-masks. Without them, she and Ki-Gor could never have made their escape across the Barren Ground.

After they had been traveling for what seemed to Helene several hours, Ki-Gor called a halt.

"Are we near the Barren Ground?" Helene asked.

"Yes, very close. Give me my mask."

It took Helene several minutes to teach Ki-Gor how to put on and wear his gas-mask. He was inclined to rebel at the nose-clip. But finally, he got it on straight, and Helene started to put hers on, when she felt a chill go down her spine.

Up the trail, perhaps a hundred yards away, a light winked in the trees. In this rain, nothing but an electric torch could survive. Colonel Bauer was wasting no time pursuing them!

"It's the German!" she hissed in Ki-Gor's ear.

"Yes, is your mask fixed right?"

"Wait a minute!"

Her hands began to shake so that she could hardly adjust the contrivance. For a number of agonizing seconds, she fumbled with the mask, as the flashlight blinked nearer and nearer. Finally, everything went into place and she took Ki-Gor's hand. A pale beam of light swept over them as they dashed on to the steaming, misty Barren Ground. Shot after shot echoed behind them, but without effect. Soon the trail twisted around a great, eroded ledge, and they knew that they were safe at last from Colonel Bauer. As they slowed down to a walk, Helene gloated to herself over the position of the Prussian, left without a gas-mask and raging impotently behind the barrier of the Barren Ground.

STILL holding Helene's hand, Ki-Gor led the way cautiously through the maze of eroded boulders. It was impossible to see anything, and he could only go by the feel of the trail beneath his feet. He remembered that it was extremely winding so that the direction of the wind-blown rain was of no particular help. Several times, Ki-Gor had a sickening feeling that he had gone off the track and gotten lost. But each time he kept on going, groping his way, and eventually the deep roar of heavy rain on trees told him that he had negotiated the trail successfully.

Helene, seeing the blurred forms of the trees, tugged at his arm to stop. But Ki-Gor was in no mood to stop until a good safe distance separated them from the deadly Barren Ground. In fact, not until they had unmistakably reached the Slaver's Road did Ki-Gor consent to halt. They took off the stuffy gas-masks and stood for a moment, hand in hand, breathing lungfuls of the sweet, damp air. It hardly seemed possible that they had been up the Forbidden Mountain and gotten away safely.

"We'll go east a little distance," said Ki-Gor, "and find a tree to spend the night. A little sleep will do us good, and then as soon as it's light we'll go on back to the caves."

"Don't stop now on account of me," Helene said sturdily. "I'm ready to keep going all the way tonight, if you want."

Ki-Gor squeezed her hand affectionately. He would liked to have kept going, but he was afraid that Helene would become too exhausted. He decided that it would be better to rest for a while, so they groped through the wet darkness until they found a convenient tree.

When they woke up, stiff and sore, it was still raining. The dirty gray daylight revealed that the tree they were perched in was very close to the Slaver's Road. Ki-Gor was just starting to climb down, when some intuition caused him to pause and listen. Above the soft dripping of water on the forest leaves, he thought he heard something else. He gestured imperatively to Helene and they both flattened themselves out on top of their respective boughs.

They were not a moment too soon. Around a bend on the Slaver's Road came a file of blacks wearing leopard-skin headgear. They passed within plain sight of Ki-Gor and Helene. If one of them should look up!

Ki-Gor counted sixty-two of the Leopard men, vicious, silent, purposeful blacks. Many of them were carrying loops of rope over their arms, a thing which puzzled Ki-Gor. But what worried him most was the fact that they were traveling eastward —the same direction that he and Helene must go to get back to the caves.

Providentially, not one of the Leopard men looked up as they went past the tree, and Ki-Gor lay flat without moving, long after the last one had disappeared.

When Ki-Gor finally thought it was safe to descend the tree, he led the way slowly and cautiously along the Slaver's Road, studying the footprints in the mud carefully. Ki-Gor was without a weapon of

any kind, having lost his Vnetse spear in the dash down the mountain, and he had no intention of bumping unexpectedly into the rear of the Leopard column.

It was a silent and wary couple that arrived at the point where they turned off the Slaver's Road and cut southward through the parkland. It was a tremendous relief, however, to see that the Leopard men had continued eastward.

RIGHT away, the spirits of the couple went up, and they increased their rate of travel sufficiently to arrive at the foot of the cliff with three hours of daylight left.

"Oh! Ki-Gor!" Helene exclaimed "Isn't it wonderful to be back home again!"

Ki-Gor grinned and started climbing up the great tree. Helene could hear Shuba, the goat, ba-a a greeting as he swung from the tree-top to the cave mouth, and a moment later, O'Brien's shrill chatter filled the air. Ki-Gor let down the bucket and whisked her up the cliff face. It was with a glad and thankful heart that Helene stepped out onto the rock-shelf and walked into the caves.

"Oh, this is such a wonderful home," she sighed. "I hate to think of leaving it. Do you really think we need to, now, Ki-Gor?"

"Yes," Ki-Gor answered soberly. "More than ever now."

Helene looked at him sharply. He seemed to have lost some of his good spirits.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied gloomily. "I don't know. I think I smell danger somewhere."

"Oh, nonsense!" Helene scoffed. "How can anyone smell danger? I think you're just having a reaction from your nerve-wracking day, yesterday."

"Maybe," said Ki-Gor laconically. But he drew the elevator carefully inside the cave, and then sat and stared down at the forest, a spare *assegai* across his knees.

"I know what'll make you feel better," Helene announced, "and that's a little something in your stomach. I'll go out and milk Shuba, and in a little while we'll have something to eat."

She left him sitting in the cave mouth and went out on the grassy ledge which was Shuba's pasture.

A fine rain continued to fall, giving the effect of a gray translucent blanket over the forest. An eerie silence hung over the world, lightened only by the liquid sound of moisture dripping off the leaves of the great trees. Ki-Gor's eyes flicked restlessly over the panorama, up and down and back and forth. There was not a thing that he could see that indicated anything out of the ordinary. Yet his ears—his whole nervous system—was tensed and alert for the slightest hint of something wrong.

Ki-Gor bitterly regretted that he had not been able to recover his bow and arrows when he and Helene escaped from the Forbidden Mountain. His only weapons now were two rough, flint-tipped *assegais*. They were reliable only, of course, at short range, and would not be much use against overwhelming numbers of human enemies. Such as those sixty-two Leopard men. Ki-Gor shook his head irritably. Why should he be worrying about the Leopard men? The last indication he had had of them was their tracks carrying on eastward on the Slaver's Road. If they continued in that direction they would come nowhere near the caves.

And still the conviction persisted within him that he and Helene were threatened by some appalling danger.

Suddenly, his muscles stiffened involuntarily. Every nerve in his body jangled. He held his breath and listened intently for a half a minute. He could hear nothing. And yet—it was as if he could *almost* hear something, some sound that was just out of earshot. And that sound was human voices.

He waited several long minutes but there was no repetition of the sound which he had just barely heard—or not heard. Ki-Gor stood up with a grunt of disgust and walked through the caves to the vertical passageway up to the lookout. He climbed up quickly and leaned out of this highest of the cave mouths.

There was still nothing to see but the moist gray pall that hung over the jungle. He twisted his head to the right and stared along the cliff-face. But the cliff curved on that side, and the narrow grassy shelf, Shuba's pasture, was just out of sight.

At that moment he heard Helene scream.

As Ki-Gor plunged down the shaly hole to the lower level of caves, he felt something akin to relief. Whatever the danger

was, it had arrived at last, and that was better than the fearful suspense of waiting for it.

But where, he asked himself, as he dashed through the caves, could any danger come from?

THE sight that greeted his eyes as he burst out onto the grassy shelf drove all thoughts from his mind, leaving only a fearful rage. A Leopard man was standing on the shelf between him and Helene.

Helene was standing with her back pressed against the cliff. Her eyes were dilated with horror watching the evil black moving toward her. Ki-Gor wasted no time wondering how the Leopard man had climbed up to the shelf. He reached the murderous brute in four great bounds. The Leopard man was facing the other way and did not hear his doom approaching until it was too late. Then he half-turned with a startled grunt and threw up a warding arm. But Ki-Gor disdained to use the *assegai*. He hooked a terrific right hand punch to the side of the Leopard man's face. The blow lifted the black off his feet. He landed off balance on the edge of the shelf. An agonized cry broke from him as he teetered on the brink of the ledge. Then slowly he toppled off. A long, despairing scream floated up and was abruptly cut off.

Still in a towering rage, Ki-Gor turned to Helene to ask her what had happened and where the Leopard man had come from. Then he saw the rope-end dangling against the inner wall of the cliff. At the same time Helene screamed again.

"Ki-Gor! They're coming *down* the cliff from the top by ropes!"

He jerked his head back and stared upward. A Leopard man was climbing down the rope, hand over hand. Along the top of the cliff, a hundred feet above the shelf, a row of heads appeared.

"Helene!" Ki-Gor said grimly, "run inside."

He stepped back a pace to let Helene pass him. His hand gripped the *assegai* purposefully. As long as they come down, one at a time, he thought, there will be no trouble beating them off. Ki-Gor was quite confident he could vanquish any Bantu in Africa.

When he looked upward again, his face grew serious. Another Leopard man was following the first one on the rope. And as Ki-Gor watched, a third started clambering down. The Leopard men had perceived their disadvantage, and were proceeding to remedy it.

The three men kept close to each other and descended slowly and carefully. Ki-Gor studied the situation. To be sure, the men would be handicapped until they were free of the rope. He could easily kill the bottom-most man, but while he was engaged in that, the other two might drop off on either side of him and cause him trouble.

Then an idea struck Ki-Gor.

He himself had been on the very top of the cliff some days before. He knew it was a broad, grassy field with no trees very near. Therefore the top of this rope could not be anchored on any solid object. It was probably being held by ten or twelve of the Leopard men. Ki-Gor grinned wickedly to himself. He knew how easily even twelve men gripping a rope could be jerked off their feet.

The lowest of the three descending Leopard men was only about thirty feet above him, now. Ki-Gor dropped his assegai and seized the dangling end of the rope. He gripped it securely and gave a prodigious tug. There were cries of alarm from above, and the rope gave about two feet and held. Without a moment's hesitation, Ki-Gor got a new grip higher up, and jumped straight up. He came down in a sitting position, throwing every ounce of his two hundred pounds on the rope.

This time the rope came with him. There were terrified yelps from above, and five bodies came flying off the top of the cliff. The rope bent away from the cliff-face and then crumpled. For a brief moment, the air seemed to be filled with twisting black forms. Two of them struck the grassy shelf and bounced off with a horrible mewing. The rest went straight down to the rocks at the base of the cliff.

Ki-Gor glared upward and roared in defiance. Single-handed, he had destroyed nine of the murderous Leopard men. Helene stood in the entrance to the caves, and looked upward, pop-eyed. She gave a sudden scream. But Ki-Gor had seen the danger and hopped nimbly to one side as a good-sized rock crashed down on the shelf.

Nine out of sixty-two! Ki-Gor exulted. Truly these caves were impregnable! Perhaps he wouldn't move away from them, after all.

But the Leopard men were not finished yet.

The end of another rope snaked over the top of the precipice. But this time, the implacable men up above were not repeating their first mistake. A second rope appeared, and a third. The three were spaced ten feet apart. Down, down, the ropes crept, and Ki-Gor's eyes narrowed. The ends kept on coming until they touched the grass of the shelf.

KI-GOR seized one of them and tugged furiously at it. But it was well and safely anchored, this time. There were probably fifteen men to a rope. Then Ki-Gor saw the Leopard men's new strategy. Three of them appeared over the top of the cliff, coming down hand over hand. But there was only one man to a rope. The Leopard men were not going to overload their ropes again.

The three new invaders kept abreast of each other as they came down, and Ki-Gor saw that unless he did something about this new problem, the three would land together. While he attacked one, the other two would attack him. Then a slow grin broke over his features. He walked to the nearest of the rope ends, gripped it, and began swinging it. A shriek of terror from above told him that his defensive strategy was absolutely sound. By swinging the bottom of the rope away from the cliff-face and then back to it, he was cruelly battering the body of the man against the smooth rock. The Leopard men shouted back and forth to each other, and shortly afterward, all three ropes were drawn up over the top of the cliff.

Victory! Ki-Gor brandished his *assegai* at the discomforted enemy and laughed scornfully. Then gleefully, he dodged the shower of small rocks which pelted down on him. He retired to the cave mouth and cocked a watchful eye upward. As he saw the situation, there was only one possible way now that the Leopard men could defeat him, and he trusted their primitive brains to overlook it.

But very soon, it became evident that he underestimated them.

Four black bodies edged over the lip of the precipice above and swayed downward. The enemy had finally thought to suspend the men at the ends of the ropes. Ki-Gor knew then that they had won. He could do nothing until the murderous blacks landed on the shelf. And then, if they landed together, they would be too many to handle.

"We have to go," he said, turning wearily to Helene.

"All right," she said, trying to hide the fear in her heart, "I'll run and fill the counterbalancing bucket with water."

"Wait!" said Ki-Gor sharply. He had just caught a glimpse of a dark form slipping back into the jungle at the base of the cliff. Of course. the Leopard men would have stationed some of their number down there.

"I'm afraid we're trapped," he said quietly.

They stood and looked at each other for an awful moment. Then Ki-Gor suddenly snapped his fingers.

"The chimney!" he exclaimed, "I don't know how far it goes, but we'll try it."

"Supposing it doesn't stay wide enough all—all the way?" said Helene, wide-eyed.

"Then we'll just have to decide whether to stay there and starve, or come back and be captured. If they capture us now, they will probably kill us. But come, it's our only chance."

Ki-Gor patted Shuba, the goat, farewell, and followed Helene into the kitchen. O'Brien scuttled up to her shoulder, and Ki-Gor lifted her up through the gaping hole which the earthquake had opened in the ceiling of the kitchen. He waited a moment while Helene scrambled for a foothold on the shaly sides of the chimney, and then leaped up after her.

Once the chimney leveled off and traveled horizontally, it proved to be fairly easy going. It was big enough to crawl through on hands and knees, and had only a slight upward slope. Ki-Gor's hopes began to rise as Helene, close in front of him, kept on going for minutes and minutes. He tried to estimate the distance they were going. This was hard to do, but when Helene called a halt to catch her breath, he felt sure they had covered a hundred yards.

But when Helene started crawling forward again, after a brief rest, his hopes were abruptly dashed.

"Ouch!" Helene exclaimed, and then paused for a dreadful moment.

"Solid wall ahead?" Ki-Gor asked in a low voice.

"Yes," Helene whispered.

"Feel all around you," he directed, "in all directions."

Just then, O'Brien began chattering—at some distance away!

"Say!" Helene cried. "Is he behind us or ahead of us?"

"Ahead of us, I think," Ki-Gor replied excitedly. "Feel up above your head."

"Oh! Ki-Gor! It's clear! I'm getting up—I can stand up!"

"Good!"

"It's even better! Ki-Gor, we're saved! I can see daylight!"

KI-GOR hastened to follow Helene past the elbow, and both of them scrambled toward the opening without regard to lacerated hands and knees.

Just as Helene was about to crawl out into the open, Ki-Gor had an acute premonition of danger.

"Helene!" he shouted. "Wait! Don't go out yet!"

But his warning came too late.

Her head bobbed out into the sunlight, and before she could pull back, black hands seized her and dragged her screaming out of the passage-way. Ki-Gor snarled with self-anger. He should have realized that the chimney might have come out close to the main body of Leopard men! He gripped his *assegai* and lunged out of the hole.

The sharp prongs of an iron claw raked one shoulder as he erupted into a yelling mass of blacks. He rolled to his feet and came up fighting like a maniac. He hurled himself, hitting and stabbing, at a group surrounding Helene. But in his heart, he knew that unless something happened quickly, that he would be overpowered by sheer weight of numbers.

At that moment, several of the Leopard men uttered cries of alarm. Instantly, the whole group seemed to lose taste for battle. The two who held Helene released her and started running away. The rest scattered in all directions.

Ki-Gor stared about him. They were standing on a grassy slope close to a dense forest. And out of that forest, a host of blacks was charging. The miraculously reprieved couple stood routed to the spot in amazement as the newcomers flew after the Leopard men and slaughtered all of them within reach. Finally, Ki-Gor woke up to the possibilities of danger from this new group.

"Get back in the hole," he commanded Helene, but jerked his head around as he heard his name called.

"Ki-Gor! Bwana Ki-Gor!"

An old, white-bearded Negro was running tward them.

"Tsempala!" Ki-Gor shouted delightedly.

It was the fine old witch-doctor of the N'Gori, whom Ki-Gor had befriended weeks past during the revolt of the northern tribes.

"Thank the gods we came in time!" the old man panted as he approached them.

"But who are these warriors?" Ki-Gor exclaimed wonderingly.

"Some Bushongo, some Baronga, and the rest M'Fang," Tsempala told them, "but all of them Brethren of the Dog! Chowanda, the Bushongo, led them here after he found your picture message on the grave of his brother, Toogli. He immediately sent out a call, arousing the Brotherhood of the Dog to exterminate the murderous Leopard Society. Kainya the Kikuyu, brought me news of you, and I was in the Bushongo country looking for you, when Chowanda sent out his call."

Half an hour later, the triumphant Brothers of the Dog, one hundred and fifty strong and representing three tribes, squatted in a great half-circle around Ki-Gor, Helene and Tsempala. Chowanda, squat and long-armed like his brother, stood before them.

"My thanks and congratulations to you, O Chowanda, and to your Brethren," said Ki-Gor, "You have accomplished a great thing today in crushing the Leopard Society, and you have saved the life of Ki-Gor and his woman."

"Ki-Gor will always be the friend of the Brotherhood of the Dog," Chowanda replied gravely. "Let him and his woman travel where they may, anywhere the length and breadth of Africa, they will find Brothers of the Dog who will have been apprised of his coming, and who will offer their hands in friendship. For though

Ki-Gor's skin is white, he is heart, blood, and bone, a true African."

"Ki-Gor's ears hear," the jungle man answered simply, "and his heart is warmed."

"There is more to be said," Chowanda went on, "and as leader of this war-party, I have the office to say it. It might just as well come from Tsempala, or Kainya, the Kikuyu, or my brother, Toogli, were he alive to say it. It is merely this. If, one day, it should ever come over you that you desired to join the Brotherhood of the Dog, O Ki-Gor, you have but to say the word. Any one of us will gladly give you the preliminary education which is necessary, and you will promptly undergo initiation."

"Fairly spoken," Ki-Gor answered, "and I will never forget." Then a slow smile spread over Ki-Gor's face, and he turned to Tsempala. "Do you think, O my friend, that these warlike fists of mine could ever learn to clutch a charcoal and outline a picture-message that didn't look as if it had been drawn by an absent-minded baboon?"

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Garden of Skulls

By STANLEY FOSTER

The bagpipes o' the misty Highlands scream shrilly as Scotty McColl makes white man's *ju-ju* in the Garden of Skulls!

NAGADA, witch-doctor of the tribe M'gana, looked at his protuberant belly and shuddered as the thudding drums throbbed slowly from the *kraal* and sent low waves of sound up the hillside.

Those drums spelled his doom.

Well, it was the law. It is written that

the old witch-doctor must die if he fails to bring the rain. And for four moons there had been no rain and the M'gana were becoming impatient. They wanted to see if N'tola would be any better, for had he not brought rain, once?

Nagada had brought rain many times. His huts were set on a hillside, for where there is a hill with trees there is usually rain. But now the parched mealie patches of the M'gana blistered in the heat and the brassy sky never changed. What had happened to the rain?

Very soon N'tola would come with the men of M'gana and he would fasten Nagada's umbilical cord to a tree, using a thin sharp dagger for that purpose, and stand by to watch Nagada run slowly and very painfully round that tree until he died.

Thus the gods would be appeased and rain would come.

Nagada had grown fat as a witch-doctor, for many good things came to him because of his big magic. Cattle, gold, jewels and wives. Wives with slim brown bodies gleaming with oil. Wives with pendant breasts and thighs like tree-trunks. Many wives.

He thought, without regret, of the time when old Kamenu, whose place he had taken when he was young and straight as a spear and with muscles hardened by a warrior's life, had died at the sacred *baobab* tree.

There had been no compassion in Nagada's heart then. There was no reason why he should show weakness, as the old trembling man ran very, very slowly round the tree until his entrails entwined it. But now Nagada felt fear, a thin spear of fear pointed at his heart, and a cold shudder shook him as the drum notes beat on the still hot air.

Perhaps he had become soft? The sight of his great belly told him he had become very soft and very satisfied. And he thought of N'tola, whose body was tall and hard and slim as a gun-barrel.

AND in that instant a shadow fell over Nagada and he lifted his muddy eyes to look down the blue tunnel of a .45 revolver, held in a thin brown hand covered with golden spots on which a fuzz of red-gold hair caught the sun and imprisoned it in threads of gold.

"This," thought Nagada, "is a dream. For there are none of the M'gana who own such a thing!"

He raised his eyes slowly from the freckled hand which held the revolver so steadily, and saw a thin khaki shirt, stained with sweat and torn by thorns, and finally a thin face with a dagger beard and two pointed mustache ends below a thin hawk-like beak, topped by close-set eyes of incredible blueness, all topped by an old and dirty *topee*.

Thin lips under the pointed mustaches twisted grimly as Nagada brought his eyes back once more and looked reluctantly down the long blue tunnel of the gun where Death lurked.

The thin, steel-hard finger pressing slowly on the trigger fascinated Nagada. This magic of the white man could not be trifled with. With a very slow pressure Nagada knew that his fat head would be blown off unless he raised his pudgy arms. So he raised them, quickly.

"Much better," the apparition said. He smiled. His teeth were bad and many of them were missing. The rest were stained black because the white man chewed tobacco. Now he spat.

"The drums talk," he said, sliding the revolver round Nagada's head until the hard blue barrel nestled behind his ear. "The drums talk loudly for many nights and days. I have heard them. They say that Nagada dies—and those in the villages by the river pray for rain!"

"The white *inkoos* talks truth," Nagada answered. His small piggy eyes vanished in the creases of fat around his cheeks. "Nagada must die unless rain comes." He turned his eyes aside regretfully. The little man with the hard face regarded him from two bits of chipped ice, and smiled evilly.

"Nagada has failed to bring rain," the visitor said and pressed the gun tightly against Nagada's head. He snarled contemptuously as he felt the fat go inside the barrel. "If Nagada needs rain, why does he not do big magic?"

Nagada sighed.

"I took a black cock," he said slowly. "It was the king of the *kraal* and its voice was as a brazen trumpet. There was not one white feather in all its body. And it was strong. I offered it to the gods. I

cut into its heart and caught its blood in a brass bowl. Then I took a seven-branched twig. I dipped it in the blood. This I sprinkled to the North, to the South and to the East and West. There was no rain!"

"THE gods are angry," the stranger said. He shifted the revolver slightly. "All this magic you have done is no good. You will die, Nagada. You will leave everything. Has Nagada knowledge?"

"Nagada knows many things," the witch-doctor said. The rattling necklace and girdle of dried lizards' feet, monkeys' paws and lions' teeth, shook as he spoke. "Nagada is wise."

"But Nagada cannot bring rain. So he will surely die," the stranger said slowly. He grinned, showing his blackened teeth.

"Nagada would pay well for rain?" he asked quietly.

The fat wizard raised his muddy eyes quickly. Who knows, white men can do many things. Perhaps the white man—?

"How does Nagada know the white man can bring rain?" he asked craftily. "It is written that a serpent with guile moves softly as a shadow—and a white man with a shooting-stick needs but to whisper."

"It is also written that he of little faith acquires no honor in the land of the spirits," the thin man said. "Does Nagada wish to be a star? A bird on the bough? A fish in the river? An ant in the hill? Or does Nagada set store by his life? And are his wives so old or is Nagada so feeble that he does not wish to live?"

"I have no desire," Nagada said slowly, feeling the barrel of the gun swallow more of his flesh. "I have no desire to be a bird, a fish, an ant or a star. It is good to be these things when the time comes. But I feel that the time is not yet. How much would the white man want—to bring rain?"

"It is said that there is a place where yellow metal makes a floor for the feet of those who have true knowledge," the man with the gun spoke softly. "It is also said that Nagada knows where there is a hole full of polished stones which hold fire in their hearts. This is common talk. Nagada knows this. Yet Nagada will keep this knowledge within his heart and Nagada will die and his wives will be given to another. What will Nagada do with polished stones and yellow metal when his spirit is a bird or a fish?"

Nagada shook his head.

"Ayeei!" he moaned.

The white man laughed.

"Nagada boasts he is wise," he said with a smile. "Yet Nagada, who is to die, will not gamble a few of the stones with fire, against the white man's magic. Has Nagada become so feeble that his heart fails him? Has he not seen the white man's magic? The smoke-cart that stinks? The white bird that flies? The black devil that talks? The hiss-demon that throws men and women on white sheets? Is Nagada a coward as well as a fool?"

"I have seen this," Nagada said. Beneath the darkness of his skin a grey shadow crawled. "Nagada will do what the white man asks!"

"Nagada," the white man said bitterly. "Will raise his big belly on his fat legs and show the white man the hole in the ground where the stone with fire lies!"

"This," Nagada said, heaving his obese body. "Will Nagada do. But if the white man does not bring rain he will surely die. Nagada will not be mocked. Nagada knows that the white man cannot kill *all* the M'gana with the small brother of the big shooting-stick."

Colin McColl laughed, although he cast a wary glance at the sky.

"Nagada knows," the bearded terror said crisply. "That the small brother of the big shooting-stick barks loudly. It will bark *once* for Nagada. So what will Nagada care if the M'gana kill *me?*"

"I am tired," Nagada said simply. He began to walk. The small white man walked with him, the gun-barrel almost disappearing in the roll of black flesh that covered Nagada's kidneys.

N'TOLA said: "The men of M'gana grow soft. In the days of the fighting it was the men of M'gana who washed their spears in blood and took much cattle and many wives from their enemies. But today the men of M'gana are afraid to kill Nagada. Yet Nagada does not bring rain."

A patriarch said softly: "It is written that a witch-doctor can curse the living with the spirits of the dead. He can bewitch the people and cast spells upon them. Well we know that Nagada must die. But we

must sacrifice first. If this is not done then Nagada will tell the god we have insulted him. The god will be angry with us!"

"We will sacrifice, then!" N'tola said. He clapped his hands.

Two very fat women whose breasts hung down to their waists brought forth a young girl. She was small and slim and her black body was like a weaving dark snake and they held her arms lightly, so that her small feet barely touched the ground. Her eyes were filmed over with a glazed stare and she was completely naked.

"This," N'tola said, "is the sacrifice."

"She is of the tribe Mashola," said the old man. He peered at her. "They are slim as tall grasses, these women. Their skins are as the skins of young deer. It is said that they move as the kudu or the antelope. Yet they are good mothers. Their children are tall. Has N'tola thought of this?"

"N'tola knows this," the young giant answered. Even through the mask his hot eyes blazed as the drugged girl was brought before him. "N'tola will perform the rites with her, before Nagada, and then Nagada will die!"

"The Mashola are mighty fighters," the old man said softly. "In the days now gone they were a thorn in the flesh of the M'gana."

"The M'gana are also mighty fighters," N'tola declared loftily.

"It is the law," another said. His face was worried. "Nagada must die. But first the woman must be married to the Rain God. She must be sacrificed too. This is the law!"

N'tola regarded the slim black woman and his body tensed as she swayed in her half-dazed weariness. She would be very pliable.

"We will feast," the chief said. He clapped his hands and many women came with food and drink. The drummers and musicians began to play. Somewhere the signal-drum kept talking, telling the tribes in the hills and along the rivers that Nagada had not brought rain and he would surely die.

And it was discovered in the kraal of the Mashola that Kulti, a maiden of the tribe, was not with the single women. She had gone, some said to look for herbs. But does it take a maiden two days and two nights to look for herbs?

But, her sisters in the women's hut said to each other, Kulti is slim and soft. Perhaps there is a young warrior who is willing to risk his life to meet Kulti. Perhaps her place should not be with the maidens? who knows?

It is also known, they whispered, that the chief will take Kulti to wife. This will mean big *lobolo* for her parents. At least six cows, maybe eight. There was one wife who cost twelve cows?

No? *Twelve* cows? She must have borne him many children?

It was the chief who found out that Kulti was gone. His name was Lobenga and he was a mighty fighter. He had many mighty men, too.

A man said: "The M'gana have boats. The M'gana go up and down the river. Has anyone seen a M'gana boat lately?"

It was agreed, by those who knew, that the M'gana were worthless dogs and their boats were seen too often. A boat had been by the river where the women of Mashola wash the clothes, two days ago. A spoor was found, the footprints of Kulti were smothered at the bank of the river, by those of strangers.

A big fire was made. There was much native beer and great pots of food were cooked. The young men of Mashola painted their bodies with ochre and white mud. Their assegais were sharpened on stones and they went to the arrow-maker and found many arrows. The warriors began the dance, working themselves into a blood-lust against those who had taken the maiden, Kulti.

The drums of M'gana could be heard talking, very far away.

COLIN McCOLL stuffed things into his knapsack and slung it over his shoulders. Then he took the old practice chanter from his hip-pocket and softly tested the reed.

"H'mm!" he muttered. "A wee bit cracked but it'll do!"

When he went back to where Nagada sat hunched up, waiting for the moment when the torches of the M'gana would blaze on the hill and the first assegais of the men would appear, he had with him a quantity of long hollow bones. These he

laid down on the ground. He took from his pocket a sharp pocket-knife.

"Nagada has given the *inkoos* what he wanted," the witch-doctor said unhappily. "Yet if it were not for the small brother of the shooting-stick Nagada might still have these stones. The *inkoos* has not yet made rain!"

"Bide a wee," Colin said, his icy-blue eyes glittering. He seemed calm enough but had Nagada been less occupied he would have seen his lips tighten as he spoke. Plainly Colin McColl was worried, too!

He took the young goat's stomach, which had been washed and cleaned and cut three holes in it, all in a line. Then to one side he cut another hole, and below that one more. "Look, Nagada!" he said, smiling frostily.

Nagada said: "This is the play of a child. What use is this. Some bones from—" He hesitated. "Where did the white man get the bones?"

"I got them down there," McColl. He pointed to the great *baobab* tree in the grove. "It was there that Nagada told me the bones of the dead are buried. Is this not so, then?"

The great body of Nagada trembled. He drew away from the Scot.

"These, then?" he asked, "Are the bones of the *dead?* The *inkoos* is not afraid?"

"Not on your life!" McColl laughed. He blew through the hollow fore-arms and placed them in a semi-circle. Into each of the three holes he placed a bone, wrapping them tightly to the goatskin bag with strong fibre string and thin strips of hide.

The old bagpipe chanter he broke in two pieces, untwisting the blow-pipe from the lower part containing the reed. These he fastened top and bottom to the two remaining holes.

Rough reeds, cut from the strong palm-trees, were shoved into the ends of the hollow bones. He tied the three bones in a line, loosely, with a rough strip of hide.

"God's truth," he muttered to himself. "The old pipe-major of the Black Watch would have a bloody fit if he saw these. But they'll do!"

Nagada had watched him as he made the makeshift bagpipes.

"Nagada knows," McColl said, "that the spirits of the dead are very strong. Nagada uses these spirits to smell out, to make charms, to place curses. It is so?"

"It is so!" Nagada agreed. His small eyes peered at the ungainly stand of pipes, made from the grisly fore-arms of the dead and he felt a cold chill pass over him. This was bad magic.

"It is said," McColl remarked, "that many are buried who cannot fly to the moon or the stars or the birds and fishes. They stay here. And they are very powerful. These, it is said, are the living dead? Does Nagada deny that he uses the living dead—and the dead, too?"

Nagada shuddered. "How does the white man know this?" he asked.

McColl smiled. "Where the white man comes from they believe in such spirits, too," he said. "They say that the voices of the dead come from—*this!*" and he pointed to the improvised pipes.

"Is this so?" Nagada asked.

"Nagada will live and Nagada can ask," McColl said sardonically. "Nagada can go to Bulawayo and speak to Major Throckmorton who is an *inkoos* with one glass window in his face. He speaks *'Haw, haw'* and his mouth is filled with pebbles. If Nagada asks this question, the Major will say that what comes out of the bag is the voice of the dead—and that all the Scotties ever killed scream in the bagpipes."

"This may be true?" Nagada demurred. "But how will this thing of the dead voices bring rain and how will Nagada live if there is no rain?"

"The M'gana will soon be here," Colin answered, squinting down the path to where the lighted fire of the *kraal* could be seen glimmering. "When they come here, Nagada will see for himself." Under his breath he added, "But how in hell I'll *make* rain I have no idea—at the moment."

NAGADA sighed, dropped his weary head on his fat knees and stared at the dimming shape of his feet. Inside his huts his wives wailed dismally. Far off, a hyena answered its mate's sardonic laughter with a howl of obscene mirth. Below, the chant of the drunken tribesmen rode with the beat of drums and cacophonous music.

McColl saw the torches glaring and a surge of voices rose as the tribe began to march from the *kraal.* Nagada rose

quickly, his fat belly heaving as his breath pumped rapidly. The whites of his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"They come!" he gasped. "They come for me. *Inkoos—rain*—you must *make rain!*"

McColl heaved the pipes to his shoulder. His eyes held a shadow of fear.

Thus they were standing as N'tola, his face hidden behind the devil-mask, strode into the clearing with the slim body of Kulti lying in his arms. The flat stone in the middle of the ring of huts was bare.

He held the girl up for all to see and placed her nude body on the stone. The drummers, with their drums of human skin, sat in front of the altar and began to strum softly. N'tola began to dance.

He chanted:

"Nagada has been a witch-doctor for many years. He has made much magic. He is now old and fat. And no rains come. The M'gana will die if rain does not come soon. Nagada must die, too. Nagada will die tonight. I will kill Nagada. I will bring rain. It is written that he who does not bring rain must die. Is Nagada here?"

"Nagada is here," the stricken man said.

"Nagada will see this maiden married to the Rain God," N'tola cried. "He will see N'tola marry her and then he will see N'tola sacrifice her to the Rain God. Can Nagada bring rain?"

"Nagada can bring rain," the witch-doctor said. He pointed to the figure of Colin McColl. "The *inkoos* has big magic. It is mine. He will bring rain."

McColl blew a breath into the bones and a weird wail issued forth, trembling eerily in the darkness. N'tola stopped dancing.

"The white man is not wanted here," he cried angrily. "No white men see the customs of the M'gana. Kill him!"

"If N'tola or the men of M'gana kill me," McColl said harshly, "There will come a Commissioner. He will bring men with shooting-sticks. They will take N'tola to Bulawayo and he will dance in the air. N'tola knows this?"

"N'tola is not a fool," the young giant answered quickly. "It is a law of the white men that they should not be here!"

"It is also a law," said McColl crisply, "that witch-doctors who offer sacrifices of maidens shall surely die. Is this not so? And will the M'gana not die, too, if the white men know that they steal the maidens of other tribes and sacrifice them?"

"What is this magic?" the chief asked. His old face was that of an interested child. He figured his ax meanfully.

McColl held up the bag of bones.

"It is said that big medicine lies with the dead," he said, watching N'tola's twitching fingers. "This is the pipe of the small death. When the voices of the dead come from this the M'gana will flee from it and bury their heads beneath their tree-bark blankets!"

"The white man is a fool," N'tola sneered. "How does he know what the M'gana will do. The M'gana are not children. How is it that this thing has such magic?"

"This thing is made from the bones of the M'gana dead," McColl said. The swift rush of fear into their faces almost made him smile. But a smile now might ruin his desperate, hair-brained plan. His face was stern as he answered, "These bones are the bones of your ancestors. I will make them speak."

N'tola screamed: "He has defiled our graves. He has taken our dead ones and these are their bones. *Kill him!*" In the instant that his hand flew to his ax McColl's fingers flickered and N'tola gazed into the ugly barrel of the .45. He dropped the ax, quickly.

"If N'tola would join his fathers," the soft suggestive voice murmured, "he will throw the ax—but the little brother of the big shooting-stick will send N'tola on a long journey!"

"ENOUGH!" the chief said wearily. "It is known to us what it will do. Let us hear the voices of the dead thou speakest about!"

"Let the M'gana beware. The white man's magic is great!" McColl barked, steadying his voice against the fear within him. "If they hear the voices of the dead, the M'gana will flee—like women—to the safety of their *kraal!*"

A growl, and the clatter of broad-bladed assegais against hide shields answered him. Knobkerries swung gently. McColl breathed faster. He had to take a terrific chance on their superstitious fear.

Slipping the gun in his belt, and sling-

ing the pipes on his shoulder he prayed silently that the slight twinge he felt was prophetic. With a great gasp he filled the make-shift bag—and squeezed it!

The air was rent by the shrieking wail of unknown forces. Eerie howls rose, trembled thinly, broke and screamed around the frightened natives. Eyes rolled in terror. Into the night-sky the tortured ululation drifted, swung down, ran in whimpering trills up and down their trembling spines. Nothing like it had ever been heard. As if all the imps in Hell were loose, the hellish din went on—more than the poor superstitious natives could stand—more than N'tola, even, could endure.

N'tola was the first to run. Without another glance at Kulti's naked body on the stone he leaped backward, running for the shelter of his hut, the devil-mask falling from his frightened face. Like a stampeded herd of wild elephants, the M'gana followed him—a black horde of terror!

Down the path they went, shouting in fear, as the wailing yells pursued them. They leaped for the cover of their huts, for the security of their blankets, anything which would hide them from the howling screams of the dead whose voices now hooted from those damnable pipes.

And the Mashola, seeking to avenge Kulti, came upon there as they fled! Assegais flashed in the darkness and N'tola sprang into the air with a great blade through his heart. Arrows filled him as he fell.

Caught between the shrieks of the risen dead and the assegais and arrows of the maddened Mashola, the M'gana fell, dead and dying, on the path. The young warriors of Mashola washed their spears in the blood of their enemies and in the darkness their shouts of maniac joy rose to the ears of Nagada as the rain burst from the clouds that had gathered swiftly in the night.

The Mashola did not stop! Into the *kraal* they went, tearing women and children from the huts, setting fire to the flimsy structures. In the lashing rain they leaped and yelled, brandishing blood-stained spears against the orange flames.

Growing fainter in the distance the weird howling of the pipes added the final note to a night of terror. Colin McColl had gone!

On the hillside Nagada stood with the rain beating on his face and raised his arms above the slim and lovely body of Kulti. And this was unfortunate because it was thus that the Mashola found him, and a throwing spear drank deep of his full and grateful heart.

Kulti woke up in the chief's newest hut the next day and found that she had many slaves of the M'gana to do her bidding.

"IT was all a monumental bluff, of course!" Scotty McColl grinned to an admiring circle of young mining engineers in Northern Rhodesia some time later, "*I* can't *make* rain. Neither could Nagada nor N'tola!"

"Well, it was providential for you that the Mashola arrived when they did—and the rain came, too!" Manager Hall of the Roe-della gold-mine laughed. "If that combination hadn't occurred you'd be in among the graves of those M'gana you robbed!"

"I took a chance, Tom," the wiry Scot answered. "It was a gamble—and, I suppose, my life was the stake. But for years I've been acquiring diseases in Africa—malaria, dysentery, fevers—Lord knows what! And my body's a walking barometer!"

"So, in a way, you knew it was going to rain?" a young Canadian asked. "Why all the palaver, then? What was the idea of those nutty bone pipes? Whyn't you just tell the old coot it was goin' to rain?"

"I wasn't sure myself," Scotty laughed. "The twinges I get usually mean rain—sometime in the next few days! And after you've been out here as long as I have, you'll know that a nigger expects a show—and a damned good show—for his money. The pipes were just a part of the act."

"Seems a helluva lot of trouble to take," the Canuck persisted, "Unless you get something pretty good for it. Riskin' your life, I mean?" His eyes opened as Scotty pulled a handful of shiny stones from his pocket and rolled them around in his palm.

"Aye! I suppose it would be," McColl answered quietly. He grinned, put the uncut diamonds back in his pocket, and ordered another drink.

The Flaming Serpent

By GUY L. JONES

"Goat without horns!" Those words sent a shudder through the bravest Marine in Hayti. For the goat-without-horns was to be Nelson himself . . . grisly sacrifice at the shrine of the sinuous Fire-God!

SLOWLY and painfully Captain Nelson struggled back to life. As he fought against the surging blackness that seemed to drag toward oblivion, distorted visions floated across his brain. Sharp pains like the jabs of hot needles shot through his temples; his throat ached for moisture. In his ears sounded the beat of

innumerable drums. Strangest of all, he seemed to be once more on shipboard, and the choppy motion sickened him. For minutes that seemed ages he lay in immobile agony.

At length, his rebellious muscles were once more under control, and with an access of strength he endeavored to raise his hands to his aching head. To his consternation his arms refused to move. They were close together and extended beneath his outstretched body; it seemed that they had grown to his back. He strove to cry out, to call for aid, but from his mouth there came only a hoarse, wordless sound. For an instant he glimpsed a horrid vision of paralysis. Then he found that he could move his legs, although a band of fire seemed to be tightening about his wrists. But with the cessation of his struggles, the spasm of fear passed, and he realized his situation. He was gagged, and his arms were tied behind his back. Moreover, he was not on a ship, but on a litter, and it was the uneven gait of the bearers that had produced the illusion of a tossing sea.

It was characteristic of Nelson that he proceeded to consider the situation calmly. Not without reason had he gained the reputation of being one of the most resourceful officers of the Marine Corps. But in the present instance, it would have been no reflection on his soldierly qualities had he given way to despair, for he understood clearly the peril of his position.

With an instinctive feeling Nelson knew that he was in the hands of the black dwarf —that deformed and malignant priest of Voodoo, who was the most powerful and persistent enemy of the little company of American marines that was striving, against odds, to bring order and decency to this particular corner of the black republic of Hayti. And now, as he was borne swiftly through the night, the officer recalled the message that told him one of his men was lying wounded just outside the village. He had hurried alone to the spot and entered the hovel where he expected to find the dying marine. He remembered nothing more.

After a time a low command came from the darkness, and the litter was dropped to the ground. A hand fumbled for Nelson's collar and dragged the American to his feet. Then in his ear sounded a sinister, throaty chuckle. Turning quickly, he saw, close to his elbow, what appeared to be the figure of a twelve-year-old boy. Of the creature's face Nelson could distinguish nothing in the darkness, but its eyes shone with a greenish light like those of a beast. For a long moment the uncanny eyes seemed to leer and mock at the captive officer; then, rising on his toes the dwarf spat full in Nelson's face.

If the dwarf expected his enemy to strain at his bonds in a paroxysm of impotent fury, he was disappointed; if he thought the insult would go unanswered he was deceived. Quickly Nelson drew back his right leg and swung it forward. Although the dwarf was standing too close to his captive to get the full effect of the kick, the marine's foot landed with sufficient force to hurl him into a bush half a dozen feet away.

A roar of rage went up from the negroes, and Nelson's eyes caught the swift glimmer of steel. But the dwarf, apparently unhurt, sprang to his feet with catlike agility and began to shriek commands at the infuriated blacks.

"Remember your orders!" he shrilled. "This white man is mine. Whoever touches him answers to me."

Cowed by their leader's vehemence, the negroes fell back sullenly. Nelson—who had expected nothing better than a quick knife thrust—wondered what was to be his fate.

PRESENTLY the party began to move off in silence through the woods, and Nelson received a shove that seemed meant for an invitation to march; at the same time the prick of a knife point at the base of his skull warned against any attempt to escape. Encompassed by his foes and the darkness, he felt that flight would be suicidal. Weak and shaken, he stumbled along in the midst of the natives.

The going was slow and difficult. Underfoot, roots and creeping plants caught and clung to the captive's feet; from overhead giant branches and trailing ghostly streamers of Spanish moss reached to bar his progress. Once he stepped upon a rope-like, squirming thing that sent a thrill of disgust through his frame; again a flight of vampire bats, disturbed by the movements of the party, fluttered and beat

across his face with loathsome wings.

Suddenly a staccato sound stabbed the darkness. Nelson recognized the sinister, threatening note of the Voodoo drum, its throbbing tone indistinct and low. More than once, in his efforts to capture the dwarf, Nelson had been deceived by the peculiar acoustic property of the goatskin drum, the invariable signal for the votaries of Voodoo to assemble for their revolting worship.

The party pushed on into the forest in obedience to the insistent summons of the Voodoo drum. Nelson felt like an actor in some fantastic drama. Incredible stories of the ghastly rites of Voodoo crowded his brain in spite of his utmost efforts to remain cool and collected.

After a time the ground began to slope sharply upward. The foliage no longer hung thickly overhead, and the impenetrable darkness of the lowlands gave way to a weird, grayish gloom. To Nelson the forms of his guards took definite shape; he could even distinguish the misshapen figure of the dwarf a dozen paces in advance. In the spaces between the trees he could see disordered battalions of stars that seemed to gloat down upon him with lidless, crimson eyes. From afar sounded the sullen rumble of thunder that at intervals swallowed the compelling note of the Voodoo drum.

The swift upward march continued. The band was nearing the summit of a high mountain which Nelson felt certain was Mont Julien—the huge, tree-clad mass that bulked like a gigantic cone over that portion of the island. Often he had gazed speculatively at its hazy outlines from his station at the coast village, for in that vicinity, according to rumor, was located the secret shrine of the fiery god of Voodoo.

AT last the crest was reached and the party came to a halt. Nelson knew by report that Mont Julien was an extinct volcano, and he felt that he was now standing on the very edge of the bowl. As the negroes in the rear scrambled on up to join those in advance, the prisoner looked eagerly about him.

To right and left the ridge upon which he stood stretched away until it was lost to sight; in front of and below him a group of fires burned steadily in the still air. In the circle of light cast by the flames, black, half naked figures were whirling about in time to a low chant that arose from the outer ring of darkness.

Nelson had time to see no more, for at that instant the dwarf, taking a step forward, uttered a shrill, bird-like cry. As the sound quavered through the night the dancers abruptly ceased their gyrations, then from about the fires rose a wordless, barbaric yell.

A loud whoop from a gigantic negro who followed close on Nelson's heels answered the outburst from below, and instantly the shout was taken up by the rest of the blacks. The short, exultant bark of the Voodoo drum burst forth from seemingly a dozen different directions, adding its sinister notes to the hideous medley of sound. Strong hands grasped the captive officer and hurried him down the slope and into the midst of the howling mob about the fires.

Then high above the savage clamor of the negroes rose the shrill voice of the dwarf, cursing and raging at his followers. As the crowd, momentarily cowed, reluctantly gave way, Nelson had his first opportunity to get a good look at his captor. He saw a slight, twisted body, supported by thin, splayed-out legs. The head, large and sunken deeply between the shoulders, was not round, like that of the ordinary negro, but seemed to slope upward like a gigantic black pear.

While the American stared spell-bound at this grotesque creature the crowd formed a rough circle about the fires. The excited jabbering gradually died down as men and women squatted on their haunches and leaned forward eagerly.

At a command from the dwarf, half a dozen men ran out from the crowd and dragged Nelson into the space between the fires and propped in a sitting position against a low boulder. He now saw that the fires were three in number and placed at the points of an equilateral triangle. In the very center of this space and lying on the bare, rocky floor of the crater was a large, flat stone, also triangular in form.

The dwarf stepped into the triangular space and raised his stick for silence. "Brothers," he said, "You do know how we have been persecuted by the miserable American dogs that have invaded our land.

In that evil work this man is the leader." For an instant he turned his flaming eyes on Nelson. "He has sworn to break up our religion, but the flaming god has proved more powerful than all the magic of the white man. The chief enemy is in our hands and the god knows how to revenge himself."

As the dwarf ceased speaking a roar went up from the crowd. Many of the natives sprang to their feet and flourished knives and hatchets. A brawny, half-naked negress rushed, clawing and mouthing, at Nelson as if she meant to tear him to pieces, but the dwarf sent her reeling back with a blow of his club.

THEN began a scene that to Nelson was like some hideous nightmare. The quiet that followed was broken by the muffled reverberations of a drum, and a weird, unintelligible chant rose from the crowd. The song neither waxed nor waned in cadence; it was even, toneless, and without end. Soon the negroes began to sway their shoulders in time to the insistent drone of sound that pulsed with unvarying regularity through the hot night. The chant became maddening. The drum hammered mercilessly through his brain. It was the serpent song of the African aborigines, the unholy hymn that has droned along the banks of the Congo and the Zambesi since the dawn of time.

Of a sudden the music of the drum increased in volume and a figure flung itself out of the crowd of votaries and into the space between the fires. It was a woman apparently about fifty years of age, holding in her hand a white cock. She was clad in a loose dress covered with crudely painted red and black triangles, and about her waist was a rope girdle to which was attached bits of rags, sharks' teeth, parrots' beaks, and the skulls of cats. Her woolly hair was tied in two rolls that struck out from the forehead like twin horns—the badge of the *mamaloi,* or priestess of Voodoo.

The dwarf rose from the stone on which he was crouched and, going to the nearest fire, threw a handful of gray powder into the flames. Instantly there arose a heavy black smoke that gave off a sweet, sickly smell. The *mamaloi* whirled into the rising fumes and sniffed at the pungent vapor like a hound, while the dwarf, moving from one fire to another and burning his unholy incense, resembled a diabolical gnome in the murky light.

Suddenly the columns of smoke vanished and the fires flared up with increased strength. But now the flames were of a bright vermilion hue. Instantly the whole barbaric scene was bathed in a blood-colored flood of light, while from the hot black void beyond the approaching storm growled and muttered like an angry giant.

The *mamaloi's* excitement increased. Faster and faster she leaped and spun. With a frenzied scream, she grasped the cock about the neck with her black, spatulate fingers, and twirled it round and round her head. The body, twisted from the neck, shot over her shoulder into the crowd. She ran swiftly to the white, triangular-shaped stone, and mouthing unintelligible words, traced with her bloody fingers the rude likeness of a coiled snake on the three corners of the rock. Then she confronted the dwarf who still squatted on the sacred stone like some infernal master of ceremonies.

"The lesser sacrifice has been made, my father," she said. "Now show your children the mark of the god."

"It is well," replied the dwarf, as he rose slowly to his feet. "You are good servants. Behold the mark of the god!"

As the creature spoke, he tore open the collar of his dirty cotton shirt. For an instant he stood still, while a groan of fear went up from the crowd of watching negroes. Then he turned slowly about and Nelson saw what had so affected the natives. Blazoned on the black skin of the dwarf's throat was a large bluish-white scar. Lighted by the uncanny blaze of the fires, the mark stood out with startling distinctness. It was shaped in the exact form of a coiled snake, and by some devilish illusion it seemed to twist and writhe like a thing of life.

THE dwarf began to speak, his body a blurred silhouette against the dull glimmer of the sacred stone. "My children," he purred. "The white cock has been offered up. Prepare now to witness another offering, the greatest and most acceptable of all sacrifices that may be offered to the fiery god—that of the *goat without horns.*"

As the words beat into Nelson's brain, he understood why he had been so carefully guarded by the dwarf. Like every white man in Hayti he knew the meaning of "the goat without horns," the sinister phrase used by the Voodoo worshipers in referring to the human sacrifice at the shrine of their loathsome deity.

Gradually the clamor that followed the priest's announcement lessened and died away. A harsh grating sound fell on the ears, and a murmur ran through the crowd. Then a flash of lightning zig-zagged across the starless sky, and the whole scene leaped into view. The negroes, crouching on their haunches, were leaning eagerly forward, their staring eyes fixed on the figure of the dwarf. The latter, his feet wide apart and muscles straining, was laboriously dragging the massive stone triangle from its bed. Then the black pall again descended.

The intense darkness that succeeded the lightning flash was quickly broken. With a grinding noise the sacred stone slid slowly from its place and the dwarf sprang back so suddenly that he stumbled over Nelson's extended feet. In the space where the stone had rested, there appeared a large circular hole apparently filled with moving undulating coils of pale, yellowish flame.

At this extraordinary sight a wail of fear went up from the watching crowd. In the space illuminated by the faint uncertain glow from the fiery pit. Nelson could see the negroes prostrate and groveling on the floor of the crater, while close by his ear sounded the jeering chuckle of the dwarf.

FOR a long moment the captive officer stared at the moving, flaming circles that writhed and twisted at the bottom of the shallow pit. It was as though he were gazing at some loathsome reptile whose body was a molten mass of living, crawling fire. The thing was unbelievable, unthinkable. For an instant Nelson feared that he had gone mad. He closed his eyes to shut out the awful sight, while wild, impossible ideas flashed through his mind.

A low, sweet strain of music fell upon his ear, a faint, haunting melody inexpressibly soothing and restful. The tune was that of an ancient lullaby, and the crooning air was sentient with the yearning and affection of a mother for her child.

Then Nelson's eyes opened again. The negroes were still flat on their faces. Close by the flaming hole and half facing the marine squatted the dwarf. He held a reed flute to his lips, and from it came the sound of music. But the officer hardly noticed the dwarf; his eyes were focused on the fiery aperture in the crater floor.

Straight up from center of the molten mass there rose a narrow, rounded column of yellow flame. It was as if the concentrated heat of the seething pool vented itself in one slender, elongated tongue of fire. The upper extremity of this symmetrical, unnaturally rounded column did not taper to a point as does an ordinary flame, but was cut off as cleanly as if it had been sheared through by an invisible sword. Straight and motionless it thrust itself up into the still air like a red-hot metal tube.

The lullaby ended in a gentle whisper that seemed to linger in the weird silence. As the final notes died away the dwarf struck up a new tune—an exotic, sensuous air. At the sound of the quick, entrancing strains the negroes scrambled hastily to their knees, uttering low cries of wonder, and delight. The cadence quickened, and the watching natives moved their heads and shoulders in time to the music.

For an instant, Nelson's eyes had wandered from the fiery pit to the black, indistinct forms of the unholy worshipers. In that instant a remarkable thing had occurred. The slender column of flame no longer stood up stiff and rigid from the parent bed of fire; it was swinging gently to and fro like a lily on its stem. In perfect time to the dwarf's infernal music it swayed and oscillated with a sinuously graceful motion that by its very suppleness and pliancy carried an overpowering suggestion of evil.

Then of a sudden the white man became aware of two tiny balls of fire just above the swaying column. Gently back and forth they swung, in unison with the movement of the enchanted flame. But whereas the latter was of a pale yellow color, these twin stars burned with a piercing, rubescent light like the heart of a desert sun.

The music ceased abruptly. Like a man slowly awakening from an hypnotic trance, Nelson noted the grinning, diabolical face of the dwarf and the kneeling forms of the black worshipers. Once more the staff of fire stood motionless, but it no longer retained its stiff, perpendicular rigidity; its upper extremity was curved and arched like a bent rope. Slowly Nelson's gaze followed up its even, columnular length, his eyes searching for the two balls of crimson fire whose appearance had affected him so strangely a moment before. His heart almost stopped beating at what he beheld.

The twin stars were poised motionless above the faintly flaming column, and they burned with a baleful, malignant brilliance like the eyes of a crouching demon. And now Nelson realized with a start that they actually were eyes—red, unwinking, incredibly evil eyes.

Instantly the whole picture lost its vague, unnatural aspect and its outlines became clear. He could see a flat, hammer-like head studded with blazing orbs that seemed to regard him with a cold, threatening glare, and he knew with a sense of sickening dread that the rounded tongue of flame and the shining coils at its base formed the body of a large snake—a veritable snake of fire.

With a cat-like spring, the dwarf perched on the boulder against which Nelson's helpless body was leaning. Waving his hands rapidly before the white man's face, he uttered a series of short, throaty cries. As if in answer to its master the snake gave an angry hiss.

QUICKLY it lowered its head and gatherd itself more closely into his muscular rings, its star-like eyes still glowing with a subtle, piercing intensity. A second later it again lifted its head with a slow, lazy motion, but this time it moved toward the horror-struck marine. With its arched neck glittering as if coated with jewels, it slowly unrolled its blazing folds. Then, as the tone of the dwarf's voice changed, it slowly drew back again into its flaming coils.

Suddenly a mighty clap of thunder burst from the blackness of the storm-laden air, a peal so ear-splitting that for a long moment it swallowed up the ape-like gibbering of the dwarf and the moans of the kneeling negroes. The very intensity of the sound served to jar the gathering cobwebs of madness from Nelson's brain. Before the last reverberating echoes had died away, the officer was in complete possession of his faculties for the first time since the ghastly dance of the *mamaloi*.

In a flash, he comprehended the nature of the dwarf's mummery: the flaming god that the superstitious negroes feared was merely a snake painted with phosphorus. Here was the secret of the cunning priest's power over the ignorant and degraded devotees of Voodoo. In the light of his new-found knowledge the white man laughed at himself for having been momentarily deceived by so childish a trick.

Then the high speaking voice of the dwarf broke in upon the silence that followed the thunder clap. "Brothers," he screamed. "The flaming god, the crawling god of fire, is about to revenge himself upon his enemy. He will drink the red milk of the white goat without horns. Behold and worship, you children of Voodoo."

He ceased speaking and, leaning over Nelson's shoulder, began to call and motion with his hands toward the watching snake. At once, the creature raised its hideous head and, with a graceful, sinuous motion, shot a foot of its length in the direction of the white man. Between the stubby, waving fingers of the dwarf, Nelson could glimpse the darting, silvery tongue and the flaming eyes that seemed never to waver from his own.

The flat, puffy head and the thick body gave plain evidence of the creature's venomous nature. The marine felt certain it was the dreaded lance-head, the most deadly of West Indian reptiles.

With the full realization of his fate there swept over Nelson a wave of horror greater than any he had yet experienced. In a spasm of fear, he strained madly at his bonds; great drops of perspiration sprang from his forehead; horrible, inarticulate sounds came from his gagged mouth. And as he writhed and struggled, the wailing and groaning of the black worshipers grew louder, the dwarf jabbered more rapidly, and the red, baleful eyes of the fiery god seemed to blot all things from sight.

Then, as Nelson flung his trussed body

against the boulder at his back, and strove wildly to thrust himself into the rock and away from the flaming doom that awaited him, a sudden sharp, burning pain shot through his wrist. Then he felt something warm and sticky spreading over his hand and trickling down his fingers.

As he sensed the significance of his cut wrist hope once more sprang up in his despairing heart. Swiftly his numbed, groping fingers sought for and found the thing that had wounded him—a sharp, knife-like sliver of obsidian that jutted out from the base of the volcanic boulder.

INSTANTLY he shifted his body so that the cords binding his wrists were in contact with the projection. With infinite pains he began to rub the cords against the sharp rock as rapidly as the cramped position of his arms would permit.

As to what he would do, even if he succeeded in freeing his hands, Nelson gave no thought. He had no plan. His one consuming idea was to sever the cords and gain the use of his hands. That done, nothing appeared impossible.

But time was running short. At first the reptile had almost seemed to be conscious of the terror it inspired; it even appeared to play with its victim. At one instant it would dart its long body toward him; then the flat, idiotic head, distended mouth, and curving neck would be withdrawn, and once more the heavy, corded muscles would lie in a coil of fire. But now the tones and gestures of the devilish dwarf were having their effect. Its angry hissing, its rapidly oscillating head, and gleaming fangs showed that the creature, frenzied with rage, would not for long be denied its prey.

Meanwhile Nelson pushed, pulled and sawed his hands against the stone with the fury of desperation. His eyes were tightly closed; his face, beneath its coating of dirt and sweat, was drawn and distorted; his shoulders heaved in agony. He could feel the knife-like rock cutting his wrist and into the rope; it even seemed to his strained senses that he could hear the parting of each hempen strand. The dwarf and his disciples, their eyes fixed upon their horrid god, were either ignorant or heedless of the captive's struggle.

But the appalling ceremony was hastening to its end. With a final weird yell, the dwarf leaned farther forward and began to beat a swift tattoo on Nelson's breast with his clenched fists. The fiery serpent gathering itself for the fatal spring. Its red, malignant eyes blazed with a hellish light; its sinuous flaming coil tightened and contracted; the neck beautifully arched, swelled with anger; the long, tubulated fangs glistened.

Nelson knew the crisis was at hand. He gave a last desperate heave with his arms. For an instant the weakened cords held; then, with a snap, they parted and fell from his torn and bleeding wrists.

Nelson heard a great moan burst from the assembled blacks and glimpsed a streak of flame hurtling through the air. But the white man had already acted—acted on a blind unreasoning impulse for which he himself could not have accounted. Like the jaws of a trap his hands had shot up and fastened about the neck of the dwarf. Merciless fingers dragged him forward and downward in front of his captive. The next instant the fangs of the flaming god were sunk deep in the forehead of the high priest of Voodoo.

For a long moment the snake hung suspended by its teeth, while its twisting, gleaming body seemed to scribble fiery, cabalistic designs on the sable background of the night.

Then, with a roar like that of massed artillery, the storm burst. Howling with fear the negroes turned and fled wildly from the accursed spot.

A shriek like that of a tortured fiend came from the lips of the dwarf as his body slid forward over Nelson's shoulder and collapsed limply on the sacred stone. For an instant his arms beat the air with impotent, ever-weakening motions. And when, after hastily cutting the cords that bound his ankles, Nelson again looked up, he saw a sight which was to haunt his dreams for weeks after he had reached the safety of his camp.

With unseeing eyes staring up at the storm-swept sky, the twisted, inanimate form of the black priest lay stretched across the sacred stone, while close about it the softly flaming folds of the fiery god were wrapped in loving embrace.

A Novelet of Jungle Treasure

THE CITY THAT TIME FORGOT

By BILL COOK

Horrible creatures threshed the green slime of the ancient, drowned city, but none so evil as that human hyena—the man the Congo knew as Latimayne the Hijacker.

THE black night of the African Congo closed down suddenly like the lid of an ebony coffin dropped softly in the face of the dead. As if at a signal, the river, and the hot choking jungle that hemmed it in for more than a thousand miles, became tensely silent. In all the vast darkness only the lights of the tiny

river steamer burned. Beside the pier of the wood station it lay, its brave lights fitful and smoldering in the wreaths of steaming vapor that lifted from the treacherous water.

Native huts in the steep clearing beyond the pier were dark. In Equatorial Africa the black tribes leave the jungle night to the spirits and to the beasts that hunt on satin pads.

Aboard the seventy-five-ton *Stanley*, in the guest cabin forward, where yards of mosquito netting afforded some small protection against the fiercely buzzing pests, a party of six white men sprawled motionless, except for the occasional move of a hand holding a cigarette.

No breath of air stirred. The black overhanging jungle uttered not even a whisper. At long intervals the river flowing by lapped softly at the steamer's side. To most of the party the night was a creepy, sinister thing, ominous in its impenetrable silence.

Near one of the windows sprawled a tall square-rigged fellow who, though still a young man measured by years, was known to most of the American consulate offices in the far corners of the world. Rick Colby was well over six feet and carried a pair of walking-beam shoulders that identified him as "that reckless Yankee adventurer" from Cape Town to Kamchatka. Sandy haired and blue eyed, with a quick, direct way of looking at you, he was bronzed with the suns of many lands and the winds of the seven seas.

Colby was in one of his infrequent thoughtful moods as he stretched his lithe legs before him and smothered a cigarette butt. His eyes were fixed on the netting that covered the window as if he sought to penetrate the black void beyond. Things had worked out well for him thus far. He had succeeded in gathering a small, able party including a man with money who had provided the outfit and funds. But there was a suggestion of worry in his rugged face, in the grim, tight line of his lips and the set of his blocky chin.

One of his companions, observing Colby's expression, broke the silence from across the room.

"Gets on one's nerves, doesn't it, Rick?" he said in a voice that was almost hushed. They all knew that Doctor Forte referred to the silence, a quiet so deep and dark that it made men think of a great brooding beast, creeping softly in the night . . . watching with mysterious, invisible eyes.

Colby blinked and turned toward the speaker, grinning. He arose and stretched carefully for the cabin ceiling was low. "These African nights don't bother me any more, Doc," he said, shaking his head. "But I'm a little worried about Rollins; leaving him in there alone. Damn fool thing. Spur of the moment and we were excited. Well, maybe he's safe enough at that. He's got grub and weapons—and we'll soon be there now. Somehow, though, I seem to feel that something's happened. Don't know why. Perhaps it's just the heat." He began loosening the laces of his high leather boots and unbuttoning the neck of his gray flannel shirt.

DOCTOR JAMES FORTE, physician and scientist, raised his dark brows and brushed at his trim mustache with long, sensitive fingers. He was a compactly built man of medium height with thick black hair and brown eyes and a friendly smile for all men. "We have only one more day on the river?" he queried. "Then we take to the jungle."

Rick Colby nodded in confirmation. "Yes. We'll hire black porters for the carry through the forest. If we get the breaks we'll reach Rollins inside a week."

"I don't mind admitting," observed Professor Thomas Bates, who lounged near Doctor Forte, "that I'm a bit excited. Imagine us—this little sextet of whites, uncovering the first real civilization in the very heart of Africa! Why, it has all the elements of a Hollywood thriller."

Colby laughed softly and raised a finger in a warning gesture. "Don't let your enthusiasm tip our hand, Professor," he cautioned. "Remember, we got our permit as a scientific expedition. Me—I'm frank about it; I don't care two hoots in Hades for ancient civilization. I'm counting on the treasure. There's got to be treasure!"

"Oh, of course," chuckled the pudgy, florid professor, mopping his thinning forelocks. "There will be treasure, undoubtedly. All the ancients hoarded wealth."

Pete Hilburn, a freckled, lanky man in his early thirties, whose post with the ex-

pedition was that of photographic recorder and who was stranded in Boma where Rick met him, shook his head gravely. Hilburn, like most men of unquestionable courage, was a fatalist. "Wealth!" he repeated grimly. "Free gold. Treasure! If we find treasure somebody will pay. Gold and blood always go together. History is full of it." The others turned toward him, curiously, as he continued. "Look at the lives that have been lost right here in Africa where gold or diamonds were found. Remember California and Colorado."

Colby laughed lightly. "You're not getting cold feet, Pete?" he taunted.

"Nix," assured Hilburn. "Only I just thought maybe we were forgetting the payoff. There's an old saying back home in Illinois that if you dance you gotta pay the fiddler."

"You forgot something, Pete," cut in Willie Blackmore, laughingly. "While you're trying to scare us you ought to mention about this Congo jungle being called 'the white man's graveyard.' Just gives me the creeps to talk about it."

Hilburn glanced at the stubby Blackmore and grinned. "That's just your conscience, Willie," he argued lightly. "Why don't you give yourself up?" At which the others laughed, and Blackmore said he had been thinking about it. Perhaps, when they got back to the Coast he would do it. However, the levity did not ease the tension created by the strange silence of the Congo night and Colby's reference to Rollins' safety. For some moments they just sat smoking, each with his own thoughts. And each one's thoughts were the same.

Suppose something had happened to Burt Rollins.

II

FOR something like three years Rick Colby and Burt Rollins had been rambling about Africa from one coast to another, sharing success and failure. Both were natural born flyers and it was their reputations as daring and capable airmen that led to the discovery of the mysterious lake in the heart of the Congo jungle.

According to the history of the expedition and the account of the party's experiences in the jungle, Colby and Rollins were in Nairobi when they met the man known as Hugo Calerot. It seems that Calerot, who might have been French or Russian, or most anything, had heard of the Colby-Rollins team. He informed the pair that he had an amphibian on Lake Victoria and wanted somebody to fly it to Boma at the mouth of the Congo.

Colby jumped at the chance, for he and his partner were at the moment about to cut new holes in their belts. Besides they had wanted to get to the West Coast. This was their opportunity. They took the job.

It was on this flight that they had, quite by accident, discovered the unmapped lake from the air. Leaving Lake Victoria they flew the heavy ship across the Mountains of the Moon, the Pigmy Forest and a score of jungle framed lakes. They were making a bee-line for the Atlantic Coast. Some fifteen hundred miles of the Belgian Congo jungle lay below them.

In the cabin of the river steamer the party sat talking of Africa, of the native tribes and of the vast distances of jungle choked territory still unexplored. Blackmore, who had joined the party in Matadi, brought up the subject of the discovery which seemed to fascinate him. The idea of winging fifteen hundred miles over such a hazardous course thrilled him.

"You'd have been in a tight fix, Colby," he said reflectively, "if you fellows had run into motor trouble on such a flight, wouldn't you?"

Rick smiled and fixed his blue eyes on Blackmore. "Did you ever look at a map of Africa?" he asked, then. "That old Congo River has more tributaries than a leopard has spots. We could set that tub down most any time on water."

"You make it sound pretty simple," said Blackmore.

"Well, it was," insisted Colby. "For instance, after we had been flying some few hundred miles, Rollins tapped my shoulder and remarked that another ship was on our tail. Seemed to be following us. But we gave it no serious thought, thinking it was one of the mail planes a little off its course.

"Suddenly," Colby went on, "I caught a peculiar gleam below us. It was like a flash, then the blinding glare you get when somebody on a hilltop hits you full in the

eyes with a mirror reflecting the sun. I motioned to Burt and he grabbed the controls. I rubbed my eyes. Then I looked down again and saw the strangest sight I ever hope to see. There were dull gold patterns through water picked out by the angle of the sun; long gray-whitish forms like you'd see looking down on the ramparts of a fortified position from above.

"IN our excitement we both forgot entirely the other plane behind us. We circled about and finally set the big amphibian down on the surface of the lake. Through the water we could make out buildings, some ancient submerged city.

"Burt said it was the center of the world's oldest civilization," continued Rick as his audience sat spellbound. "That remains to be seen. Anyway, we decided right there that one of us should stay to claim right of discovery on the chance that somebody stumbled along before we could get organized."

"And you two tossed a coin, eh?" put in Hilburn.

"That's what we did," replied Colby. "Burt got stuck. I left him what supplies we figured he'd need and weapons." Colby paused and shook his head grimly. "But I've been gone longer than I figured. I don't like it—one damned bit!"

"Why worry then?" inquired Charlie Bates, younger brother of the professor. "There's surely nothing to be afraid of in the jungle any more. Is there?"

Colby and Hilburn both shot an impatient glance at young Bates. The same question was, perhaps, in the minds of each. Rick Colby, at any rate, felt a definite resentment toward young Bates who appeared too soft to be coming on a trip like this. From the very first moment, back there in Matadi, when the wealthy professor had appeared with his personal baggage and introduced his brother as the sixth member of the party, Rick Colby felt that Bates was taking advantage of his position. The professor had financed the treasure party but there had been nothing said of a brother, until the last minute, the very moment of departure. And Colby's first glance at young Charlie Bates told him that they could expect but little physical help from him. Charlie was a slight, pale youth, rather handsome, with dark eyes and curly hair. From the first moment Rick had practically ignored him, young Bates returning the compliment by maintaining a careful silence, sticking close to his brother and taking only a very occasional part in the general conversation, especially whenever Colby was near.

Rick suppressed his momentary irritation at the youngster's naive question and shrugged. "There isn't much to fear, of course," he admitted. "But there are cannibal tribes and some fairly dangerous animal life prowling around."

As the last word left Colby's lips the black night broke into a thousand pieces to a shattering, eerie half scream, half laugh at the edge of the jungle clearing. The suddenness of the maniacal hunting cry of the hyena lifted the neck hair of every last member of the party. Colby saw young Bates shudder and he laughed.

"The scavenger of Africa," he chuckled. "You'll get sort of used to his grim jokes."

THE steamer journey up the mighty, rushing Congo to Stanleyville, and the subsequent changes of their luggage from one boat to another up the treacherous Lualaba came at last to an end at Kindu. Here Colby had decided to take to the jungle. Forty blacks were enlisted to pack the kit overland. A damp dawn saw Colby and his companions swallowed up in the narrow, dark and winding cavern chopped through dense undergrowth by the native bearers ahead of them.

"I should have thought," said Professor Bates, after they had been floundering along for the best part of the morning, "that you'd have arranged to get back to the lake by seaplane, Rick."

"That's a good first guess for anybody," agreed Colby readily. "I thought about that, too. But to set a plane down on that lake and then drain the water out from under it to cover the lost city—well, it just wouldn't work, Professor. Be like the fellow who sawed off the wrong end of the tree limb. No sir, we have to track it in here."

"By jingo!" chortled Bates, grinning. "That's right. Whew!" He wiped sweat from his face and pushed along. "It's such a damn silent place, isn't it. Actually feels as if it was pressing down on you, doesn't it?"

"Kind of," admitted Colby. "But we'll give you plenty of noise when we get to work on the Lost City. Dynamite will make you feel right at home—just like little old New York traffic."

Two days and nights in the deep dark jungle trails brought them to a narrow stream bank. Here was a village of mud huts and the *neapara,* headman, of the native porters declared that his men could go no further.

Colby expected this, and promptly engaged a new crew of porters with crude dug-out canoes to paddle them and their supplies up the stream. That night, as they camped close by the village, the fierce-looking old chief of the tribe to which their porters belonged staged the customary dance to celebrate the arrival and departure of the white men. Native drums, great hewn logs over which skins are stretched, thundered in the weird lights and shadows of the camp fires. Far into the night the tattooed, painted glistening warriors cavorted and chanted. Pete Hilburn, his camera always uppermost in his mind, ground out footage and grinned.

"This is a kind of medicine dance," explained Colby, who knew many of the jungle tribes and their customs. "The men who go with us will be fearless and strong."

"They'd better be," said Hilburn who was surrounded by a crowd of mystified blacks. "From the looks of those canoes we'll all be fearless."

"They'll take those canoes," put in Doctor Forte, "through rapids, whirlpools —anything. I've seen blacks on the rivers. They're really experts."

"Through crocodiles, hippopotami—doesn't make any difference to them," supplemented Colby, at which Willie Blackmore raised a puzzled brow.

RICK COLBY'S faith in the native porters, however, was not entirely justified. He knew considerable about the jungles and the blacks, but none in the party was prepared for the situation that confronted them on the evening of their second day up the unnamed tributary of the Lualaba. Colby was well pleased with their progress and felt that they were now very near to the secret lake. The sun was low in the west and the jungle was closing in solidly, black and forbidding. They would shortly halt to camp for the night.

Then to their ears came a weird moaning sound that seemed to crawl through the matted tangle on their left. Colby glanced at Doctor Forte and shook his head. All the canoes halted at once. The blacks actually froze at their paddles. Close by in the bronzed shadows of the bank, half in the mud and half out of it, lay a lazily writhing mass of crocodiles, slithering slowly one over another, their horny bodies gleaming in the half light.

"What do you suppose that was?" said Professor Bates in a voice that was a mere whisper. "Did you hear it?"

Rick nodded his head, frowning. "Damned if I know," he admitted.

The black paddlers were helpless with fear. The headman, his eyes rolling, explained to *Bwana* Colby that one of their best men was *gonjwa.* Sick. Very sick. It was urgent that they leave the white men here and return to their village.

"The hell you say!" snapped Colby angrily. "You have your *dawa,* medicine, and I am paying you well." His voice lashed the stubborn but trembling porters with every epithet he had gathered in the jungle. As a result the natives agreed, reluctantly, to make camp close by and continue next day if their ailing brother was well enough.

Fear, however, was graven in their black, hideous scarred faces. Colby, eager to reach their goal and Burt Rollins, was furiously certain that they were stalling. As they surrounded the camp fire and ate their supper, there was a tenseness in the atmosphere. The blacks huddled together at their own fire, casting furtive eyes toward the shadowy jungle.

"It was probably some tribe back there in the forest," suggested the doctor. "Making medicine, maybe. Perhaps a couple of *ju-ju* men have been sending a jungle telegraph message. I've heard they can talk over a distance of many miles."

"It's true," nodded Colby thoughtfully. "They have enormous drums made of hollowed tree trunks and skins. Sometimes they beat them like the tom-toms; sometimes they draw long hide-strung bows across them and produce some terrifying sounds. Damn it, that's what it was, all right! These blacks scare very easily."

"Superstition," declared the professor,

"breeds fear. But I can't understand why they should be frightened by something so far away."

Rick Colby stared into the fire, shaking his head, his blue eyes frankly worried. "They either know something that they won't tell," he mused, "or they have reason to suspect trouble."

"Suppose we all try to get some sleep," suggested Doctor Forte. "They may sleep it off and be all right by morning. What do you say, Rick?"

There was nothing else to do, and Rick agreed, but a smoldering, baffled rage possessed him as he picked his way toward his shelter tent.

From behind his mosquito netting that night, as he fell into a troubled sleep, Colby heard the mutterings of the blacks huddled by the fire. Several times he heard the single word *"anioto"* in a low sibilant whisper. *Anioto* is the name by which the tribes in the Babali country call that fierce, killer jungle clan, the Human Leopards.

Colby recalled this when, in the morning, he and his companions arose to find their porters gone. They were alone, six white men in the heart of the unexplored African jungle.

III

ON the narrow ledge of rock where it was decided he would make camp and stand his vigil, Burt Rollins, ran his stubby fingers through his hair and watched his pardner, Rick Colby, lift the cumbersome amphibian off their newly discovered treasure lake. He stood calmly smiling, the sun shaded from his hazel eyes by his hand, and saw the wings lift over the jungle top and the ship head west. The fact that he was being left alone, single-handed, in the depths of the endless jungle, had not yet occurred to him. The excitement, the thrill of the moment held him completely in its spell. He and Rick where rich; rich as the ancient kings. At his very feet, beneath the now rippled surface of the lake, was the hidden Oron with its lost treasure.

For a long while Rollins stood. Colby's ship was gone. The drone of its motors died away in the distance and the soft silence of the Congo forest was closing down on him, when he started suddenly. Was Rick returning for some reason? The motors of a ship were swinging nearer and nearer.

"What the hell!" he cried aloud to himself. "It's another plane!" Instinctively he drew back, listening keenly. Now he was sure. He swiftly gathered up the things Colby had left him, hurling them into the thicket which masked them from casual sight. He then stepped back into the shadows and stood warily, watching, seeking a sign of the plane. It was getting nearer every instant, coming direct, it seemed, for the very lake on whose shore he was hidden.

Suddenly, with a rushing roar, it came into view. Rollins noted that it swung in from the direction of Nairobi, eastward. Must be the ship they'd seen earlier. Could it be that this guy had been watching; had seen them land? Was just standing off waiting to see, after they left, what it was that had brought them down? Rollins crouched tense, listening. He saw the plane circle, then swiftly dive and come down, even as he and Rick had done, to rest smoothly on the lake right before him.

Rollins shook his head, puzzled. Might be that the flyers were in trouble of some sort, just a coincidence that they should happen to drop down here with Colby's ship barely out of sight. "Damn funny!" muttered Burt, watching cautiously. Then the thought struck him swiftly. Perhaps—and he remembered the ship now, had seen it before—they had been really followed for some mysterious reason. There were hijackers, even in the jungle. But why follow Rick and himself?

The seaplane, a fast looking, powerful job, as Rollins saw at a glance, shut off its motors and almost at once a swarthy tall man in white tropics and helmet slid out of the cabin onto the wing. He was peering earnestly into the water, shading his black eyes. Then he motioned excitedly to someone inside. As he did, Rollins' eyes were focused to slits and he formed a word.

"Latimayne!" he mumbled to himself, recognizing instantly the man whom Rick Colby had practically punched the ears off in a cafe called Deener's Diamond at Cape Town less than a year ago. "Hi-jacker himself. So that was the wide-winger we saw on Victoria. He must have been waiting for Calerot's crate to sail. Wondered what we were carrying!"

Victor Latimayne, a man of many aliases

and said to have spent half of his adult life behind prison walls, clutched a strut brace and hung over the wing edge, fascinated by the slowly fading, dull golden objects in the water underneath. A second figure emerged from the cabin and joined him to stare downward for a moment, bend forward as if doubting, then straighten and glance hurriedly about the long lake.

From where he watched Burt Rollins could not be sure, but the second man looked much like a character known as "Congo" Sparr, a half native thug whom he had seen in Nairobi and several other places down in the Tanganyika Territory. Askari, or native police, swore that Congo Sparr was a cannibal and never missed a chance to appease his appetite.

LATIMAYNE, at last, arose from his knee and faced the evil looking Sparr. He let out a howl of fierce joy and slapped the other on the shoulder. Rollins watched, intent on missing nothing, resigned to the fact that he was facing a dangerous situation.

"Congo, my old friend!" shouted the elated Latimayne. "We have done a fine day's work this day. Those two *Americain* fools have led us to our fortune. It is the lost city!" He pointed beneath them into the now darkening water. "To hell with their plane an' the pocketful of diamonds they were smuggling."

With a start, Rollins was aware of the innocent part he and Rick had been playing. The clever Calerot had smuggled diamonds aboard, it appeared, and Latimayne was aiming to hi-jack them on some jungle river stop! But now what? Rollins fingered the trigger of his six-shooter and backed silently into the deeper shadows as he saw that Latimayne was letting the seaplane float steadily toward the very bank on which he was hiding.

He saw the glitter of Congo Sparr's beady eyes as he grabbed a rope, ready to tie the plane to the bank. It might be best if he stepped out now and got the drop on this pair of killers, but as the ship nudged the slippery bank and the hi-jackers leaped ashore the plane suddenly was seen to leap almost from the surface. There was a riotous lashing of the water's surface and a smashing, crashing din that shook the bank and the trees around the lake. A fierce din of frightened animal voices joined in a mighty chorus that reached for miles around. Rollins stared, bewildered, while Latimayne and Sparr fell back in terror, eyes bulging as the ship was tossed and battered to bits before them.

All about was a white frothy spray and huge spoutings of water. The pontoons were battered to shreds and the ship began to settle swiftly. Rollins half crouched, fascinated, his eyes fixed on this seemingly supernatural destruction of the plane. No hand touched it. No monster of the deep appeared. Only the desperate whipping of the water and the incessant smashing, battering of some unseen force.

The hopeless battle between the defenseless plane and the invisible power that smashed it to bits lasted but a few moments. The echo of the strange sounds filled the jungle like a voice of a lashing tropic storm. Suddenly the lashing ceased, the waters calmed. Only bits of wreckage from the plane floated on the lake. Sweat oozed from Rollins' brows. It was as if he was gripped by the fever. Latimayne and Sparr, like two cringing savages, backed away further from the edge.

Rollins, in the spell of the moment, moved stiffly and his foot cracked a dead bamboo twig. Before he remembered the weapon in his hand, Latimayne and Sparr were on him like tigers, and he was held in grips of steel.

"So!" yelled Latimayne as he recognized the American. "You! Speak quick, my friend! Where is your damn pardner, Colby? If you lie or try to trick me, your bones will be picked clear before morning!"

FEW men were more resourceful than Rick Colby. Upon discovering the flight of the porters, he calmed the others and ordered the fires rebuilt and breakfast eaten. Immediately, then, he set about constructing a light raft on which he and his companions floated back down the shadowy stream to a small village they had passed the afternoon before.

"We'll get porters here," he told the others, "if I have to drive them in chains. If we had chains. Now don't worry and don't let them think you're afraid."

The chief of the little village came down to the bank to greet them, followed by a score or more men and women, all naked

as Adam and Eve. Colby jerked off his pith helmet and ran a hand through his hair. There was a reddish tinge in his hair and he knew from experience that the black tribes held a red-headed white man in some awe.

"Jambo!" shouted Colby as the grinning old chief halted. "Hello!

"Mazuri," mumbled the chief. "Good. *Bwana* bring *sana posho?"*

"Ndiyo, yes. Plenty food, *sana tobacco."*

The chief smiled, showing hideous teeth filed to sharp points. Doctor Forte and the others looked about at the staring tribesmen and the women. They were an evil looking lot. Colby suggested that they make a feast and he put out coffee, which the blacks almost worship, and English tinned biscuits. Before the sun was three hours high over the silent jungle they were once more on their way; this time traveling directly through the jungle with twenty chanting negroes loaded with their supplies.

Colby pushed his porters like a demon. Being a flyer and a practical navigator he knew almost to a compass point what bearing to take. Days and nights saw them fighting their way through miles of primitive jungle, matted and tangled with creepers and hanging vines, through bamboo thickets. They heard the shrill scream of the leopard, the cry of gorgeously plumaged birds, saw the swift slithering python slide away from their trail. They even heard the plaintive call of the gorilla in his native feeding grounds and once, for supper, they ate roast pork when they ran into a herd of bush pigs and Colby killed two with his rifle.

Crossing small streams and half dried lesser rivers, the black porters splashed ahead to scare crocodiles from the path. All day long they beat the undergrowth with poles and spears to frighten away the snakes coiled in the shafts of sunlight that penetrated the dark leafy roof of the jungle.

"We're pretty close," Colby finally called to the others, for now and then, as the forest floor rose and fell with the high and lowlands, he was able to catch a glimpse of the country. "I'm pretty sure that oddly shaped mound through there"—he pointed between a gentle cleft in the jungle crowned hills—"is just west of our lake."

A short while later they struck a tiny stream, scarcely more than a brook, and Rick shouted to the porters to bear right. He had marked it as a positive course to the lake on his first trip through the air. They swung off their course and followed the stream a few miles. Colby was aware of the rolling eyes of the porters and their strangely slackened pace.

"You notice," observed Professor Bates to Colby, "that these blacks have stopped chanting? They act as if they were ready to drop our kit and run home at the drop of a hat."

"They're a superstitious people," replied Colby, and even as he spoke, the *neapara* or headman of the packers stopped, and the blacks crowded about him nervously, their eyes furtively searching the forest.

Colby ran forward and swore hotly. "What's the matter, you pirates? Come on, drag your tails along!"

But the blacks were frightened and stood motionless. Finally the headman pointed ahead and shook his head. *"Dawa* no *mazuri, bwana!* No *mazuri—Anioto!"*

Doctor Forte was at Colby's shoulder. Young Charlie Bates stood close by, nervously watching. "He says," explained Colby, "that their medicine is no good here any more. That they fear the Anioto. That's the Human Leopard Society again."

"Maybe we've let ourselves in for something," suggested the doctor. "Where there's smoke there's fire, Rick. They must have some grounds for this fear."

"That doesn't mean that we have!" snapped Colby. "This is our party and we're going to the lake. Why, dammitall, Doc, my pal, Burt, is waiting there for us now—" He swung about on the cowering blacks viciously. "Pick 'em up, damn you and march. Go!" Snaking his six-shooter from its holster he waved the ugly weapon in their faces. The natives, from the manner in which they trudged away with their burdens, must have decided that they had more to fear from the white man they could see than from the unseen assassins haunting this jungle region.

COLBY drove them mercilessly, cursing and brandishing his pistol. Young Bates, staggering along the trail with flagging steps, unfortunately stumbled. Colby was close behind. The seat of Charlie's breeches lomed up like a target in Rick's path, and he shot out his scarred boot toe

almost instinctively. The kick straightened young Bates like the snap of a clasp knife blade and he swung about on his tormenter.

"Why you—you—" he stammered in his rage, and sent a frantic glance about him for his older brother.

"Get along, you," snarled Colby, giving Bates a hearty shove. "You wanted to come on this safari. I didn't ask you. Get going and be a man—even if it hurts. You punk."

Bates swallowed, his dark eyes blazing. Rick brushed past him in disgust and hurried along, his attention fixed now on the porters and the twisting jungle path.

The trail began to get deeper and deeper. They soon realized that the stream was leading them through a narrow *donga.* Pete Hilburn was sticking close to the native who lugged his camera and equipment.

"Listen, gang!" cried Hilburn suddenly, turning. "What's that? What do you make of it, Rick?"

Over the mysterious throb and hum of the deep jungle Colby's trained ears heard the sound. He almost shouted. It was falling water! He started running now, passing the blacks, calling for all to follow. The negroes, seeing the white leader laughing excitedly, quickened their pace, but Colby was already out of sight.

They heard his jubilant shouting ahead of them and, tired as they were, they hurried after him. Colby was yelling at the top of his voice to "Come on!" and when they finally staggered up to where he stood they found him in a sort of glade. High above him, over a ledge, came a misting spray that fell perhaps two hundred feet to form the stream they had been following.

"I think we're here, all right," panted Rick. "I imagine the lake is up there," he said, pointing above them. "We'll have to get up there somehow."

"What makes you think this is it?" asked the professor wearily.

"I don't know," confessed Rick, "'cept that my hunch is right. Direction is right on my compass. Anyway, we'll mighty soon know."

ARMED with his pistol and a long knife, Colby started up the steep side of the ravine, hacking his way through the tangled vegetation. The others waited, staring in awe at the dam. Even through the mask of jungle growth intertwined by centuries they could see that this marvel of the ages was the work of human hands. Masonry buried in a choked jungle ravine; yard upon yard of it reaching skyward, moss grown and green. And from its crest, a silvery sheen, like the lip of some Cyclopean urn . . . water . . . falling in a misty veil to the stream bed beside them.

"Oron!" cried Professor Bates solemnly. "It is Oron, indeed."

Colby, fighting his way upward, disappeared at last from view. They could hear his voice shouting Rollins' name. The professor, eager for work, called for the porters to break out the ropes from the kit. Following Colby's roughly carved path, he directed the others to start up the ravine side. Ropes lashed to the supplies were hauled up.

As they reached the top the full rays of the tropic sun broke in their faces. There was the lake of age-long mystery, smooth as glass. The porters stared, owl-eyed, trembling, casting furtive glances about them and standing close together like prisoners awaiting death.

"Take a look at the reception committee," called Pete Hilburn who was leaning over the edge, pointing at what appeared to be the long bare limb of a tree. At his voice and gesture the thing moved. A long blunt arrow shaped head raised an instant, then dived from the bank and slid into the water followed by a thick undulating body that Doctor Forte declared to be fifty feet long.

"Python," he called it. "You'd better be careful, Pete." he warned. "Those snakes can wrap a couple of coils around a man and squeeze his blood through his finger tips."

For a moment they all stood petrified, eyes on the great serpent shooting like an arrow across the water to the opposite bank. In the grim silence they became aware of the sounds of beating brush, the slashing of something in the jungle far down the edge of the lake. Doctor Forte shouted: "That you, Rick?"

"Hallo!" came Colby's voice, upon which Colby himself burst into view, sweating. In his hand he carried a rusting rifle. His face was the picture of despair. "Burt's rifle," he panted. "I found it against a tree about where I left him. Something happened—somebody was here—and it

looks from this gun that it happened right after I left him. Look at the rust."

"Let's think it out, Rick," urged Professor Bates. "Maybe he wandered off on a hunting—" He paused realizing his error. Hunting in the African jungle without his rifle; no man would do that.

"Wait a minute, professor," cut in Colby. "There's another thing. Did you see those bits of canvas and splinters of wood around the edge of the lake? Well, I did. And they're pieces of a plane—mebbe a seaplane. Something landed here or fell here, soon after I left Burt."

The others nodded and agreed with Rick. There was a feeling of tenseness in the whole party. Even the natives seemed to sense the new mystery that faced the white men. They crowded up close, chattering, their eyeballs rolling with apprehension.

Rick broke the spell. "We must find Rollins first," he declared. "The lake can wait. Three of us can stay here and three will hunt for Burt. Professor, you, Pete and I will start now. The doctor can make camp with Willie and Charlie."

"Wait a minute, Rick," broke in the professor earnestly. "Suppose you take the doctor with you in case you find Rollins and he needs medical care. I'll make camp with Willie Blackmore and Charlie."

"Good idea," snapped Colby, nervously. He was anxious to get off. "Let's go!" Followed by Hilburn and Doctor Forte, each armed with a revolver and a long knife to chop the undergrowth, they set out.

Professor Bates wiped his streaked face and, unobserved by Blackmore, winked at his brother Charlie. Poor Charlie Bates was not built for the wear and tear of the jungle trails.

IV

VICTOR LATIMAYNE'S swarthy face lit up with a wolf-like grin of satisfaction when he heard the shouting of the safari and the calling of Rollins' name. His position, masked by the matted jungle growth, let him see Rick Colby and those who followed him as they arrived near the dam spillway.

He chuckled softly to himself and nudged Congo Sparr who dozed beside him. "Our reward, Congo," he laughed, watching the movements of the unsuspecting party across the lake. "It's like I told you. That tramp Rollins lied. They're here an' they'll work for us like busy little ants. When they've done all the work, we'll step in an' take a handsome profit, my lad. Look at them now! They can't find Rollins—of course—damn him!"

Congo Sparr, more animal than human, counted the white men and their black porters, licking his lips like a starving hyena.

"They won't go far," growled Latimayne, pointing through the palm thatched roof of their bamboo hut perched atop a mammoth deserted ant hill. "There's going to be a storm." He was right. Ten minutes later, the tropic downpour burst on them.

Bates and his companions rushed for the shelter of the tents as the fierce rainstorm struck. Colby, with Hilburn and the doctor, was already out of sight and far into the jungle bellowing Rollins' name at intervals. The thunder of the sudden storm deafened their ears to the smash and clatter of wind torn tree tops, but they pushed on valiantly, chopping their way, searching every darker thicket and clump, scanning the shadowy heights among the branches where twining vine stalks and creepers choked the wild rose trees, the paper bark giants and the huge baobabs with parasitic ferns and orchids of violet, carmine, pink and yellow. Through bamboo groves they battered their paths and more than once they found themselves surrounded by thickets of wild celery six to eight feet high. Here Colby found their first clue.

He shouted hoarsely to the others, who came rushing, stumbling, the rain blinding them in their excited dash.

"It's a piece of Burt's shirt sleeve!" cried Rick, holding up a fragment of cloth from which a horde of white ants dropped as he shook it. "I'd know the shirt anywhere."

"Looks like blood on it," said Pete. "Damn it, Rick, I hope—"

The doctor broke in quickly, noting the grim line of Colby's jaw. "Probably caught it on thorns and got his arm scratched."

The rain was letting up now and the trio held a quick consultation. It was decided to go on a little further. Colby, clutching the lower part of the sleeve be believed was Rollins', began running along a fairly plain trail through the celery. Ahead of them

was more dark jungle, but through the dense foliage before them they could make out a brighter light, perhaps one of those little parks with which the equatorial jungle is sprinkled. Colby shouted at intervals: "Rollins! Hey, Rollins!"

They came out into the sudden sunlight. The rain was over. Before them was a trampled stretch of elephant grass. At some distance across the clearing they saw a monstrous old half-dead *baobab* tree, its peculiar trunk perhaps thirty feet in diameter. Colby listened intently for a moment, then shouted again at the top of his voice: "Rollins! Hallo Burt!"

They were searching the fringe of the jungle about them when, like a cry from a tomb, came a strange voice.

"Hellooooooo!"

Doctor Forte's eyes bulged and he motioned to the others, pointing with a trembling hand toward the *baobab* tree. Colby and Hilburn stared. At the base of the tree, as if it had just emerged from a dark cavernous hole in the roots behind it, stood a huge gorilla, motionless, looking straight at them.

"What the hell do you make of that?" whispered Pete Hilburn. He raised his revolver subconsciously. "Did you fellows hear somebody call hello?"

Colby nodded grimly. It was indeed strange. It sounded like Burt's voice, too, seemingly coming out of the gorilla's mouth.

Then they all heard the voice again.

"Rick! Oh, Rick Colby! That you, Rick?"

The three stared at each other, then straight across the clearing toward the motionles gorilla, its beady little eyes blinking at them. What was this? Some trick of the jungle, some weird supernatural phenomena? A gorilla speaking with the voice of the white man they hunted? No. It was just their overstrained nerves tricking them. They were hearing things.

Doctor Forte swallowed hard and rubbed at his stubbly beard. "Do you think, Rick,—" he began, then halted abruptly. They all started with wonderment, for out of the hole in the tree behind the huge ape a man staggered weakly, his hand clutched in his hair and his wild eyes roving about as if blind. He half crept, half crawled to the gorilla and placed a wavering hand on the beast's hairy shoulder. Rick Colby drew in a deep breath and held it painfully, then burst out in a shout:

"It's Burt—Burt Rollins!"

COLBY yelled exuberantly: "Hello, Burt! Here we are, over here!"

Burt Rollins' head swung about and his bearded face turned toward them. There was a tense, silent moment of waiting. They saw the dark frown on his face, then a slow parting of his lips. Colby and his partners watched, fascinated, saw a half savage smile spread Rollins' hairy lips. Then, at last, he spoke.

"Hello Rick!"

He started weakly toward them, then paused and beckoned to the silent gorilla. "Come on, Sylvia," he called, adding a soft string of mumbled gibberish which seemed to please the big ape, for it ambled along beside him.

It was then that Colby first noted the long bush knife, a weapon much like a machete, which was clutched in Rollins' claw-like hand. The lower half of his right sleeve was gone, torn away.

"What the hell are we goin' to do?" whispered Pete, his finger on his pistol trigger.

Rick muttered: "Easy," and walked slowly toward the oncoming Rollins. The sight of Burt, his appearance, his haggard bearded face and staring eyes, had done something to him, and his eyes were misty as he drew nearer to his friend. He wanted to rush forward and fling his arms about Burt to see if this was not a dream, that Burt was really alive; but the beast at Burt's side could not be denied. This was a time to keep careful hold on one's self.

"Be ready," he called back softly to Pete and the doctor. "If that thing makes a move, pour a dozen slugs into it."

Rollins, visibly weak, must have sensed the difficulty of the situation. "Don't be afraid of Sylvia," he panted. "She's quite gentle. And Rick, you ol' jungle bum, you! Where did you pick up your disreputable friends?"

Colby reached out an eager hand and Rollins grasped it with a grip like a cable clamp. They looked into each other's faces, searchingly for a long speechless moment. Rick said "Thank God, Burt!"

Burt smiled wanly and motioned to the

gorilla. "Shake hands with Sylvia, Rick," he said, and to the beast he gestured as a man would to an understanding friend, "Sylvia, shake hands with my pardner, Rick Colby."

The yard-long arm of the animal came up and Rick nerved himself for the feel of the coal-black calloused hand with its back of prickly hair. The creature was making a soft sort of crooning noise down in her throat and her shifting beady eyes moved from Colby to Hilburn and Doctor Forte.

Rick, more bewildered than afraid, managed to speak their names and nod to Burt who shook their hands and insisted that they do likewise with the gorilla. "She's quite harmless," he explained, "for all of her size. Just don't make any sudden moves. But come with me," he said, turning away, "you fellows must see where I've been stopping and you must meet Mister Stanley Livingstone." He chuckled softly and added: "He's Sylvia's young son."

Burt led them to the huge tree and Rick watched him closely, wondering if his first impression was right; that Burt's mind was practically gone. But when they reached the tree and he had plied Burt with a dozen random questions, he realized as did Pete and the doctor, that Rollins was no more insane than himself. He was weak from lack of proper food, and probably suffering from exposure and the ordeal of his experiences. But Rick knew Burt and his fiber; he was made of rawhide and would recover rapidly after they got him back to camp.

AT his suggestion that they start back at once, Burt waved a grimy hand. "Just step inside first," he insisted, pointing to the big hole in the giant *baobab* tree. "You must see Stanley. I can't walk out cold on my pals here, Rick. I've been holed up with these beasts for some time, you know."

Reluctantly, they followed Burt into the cave-like space in the tree trunk. It was fairly dry here, but there was a musty odor, the smell of animals mixed with the smell of decaying vegetable matter. Rick glanced about curiously as Burt coaxed a smoky black baby gorilla from a crevice.

The gorilla baby, at sight of them, screamed in fright and flung himself into his mother's arms, his white teeth gleaming.

Rollins laughed and hunkered down against one of the peculiar roots. This was his jungle home. The others stood stiffly, gripped by the strangeness of the whole situation, anxious to get away.

"Somebody could offer me a cigarette," suggested Burt. "Come on, you guys. Unbend. Make yourselves at home. I want to sit here for a couple of minutes to get used to you. It was a kind of shock, you know. I had about given you up for goners."

"Look, Burt," cut in Rick gently. "We want to get you out of this. Don't weary yourself with talk now. Let the doctor look you over here, and let's try to get started."

Burt shrugged resignedly and submitted to a superficial examination. Doctor Forte gave him a nip from a flask and declared that with a little support Burt could walk the few miles to camp.

"Good," said Rick, relieved.

"Why sure," agreed Burt, getting up gamely. "Don't worry about me. That little snifter is a real bracer. I can walk all right. But my pals have to come along, too. I believe Sylvia'd follow me, anyway. Are you ready?"

"And waiting," smiled Rick. "Come on." He edged gingerly out of the tree. The others crowded close after him. Burt came last with Sylvia carrying her son. They were moving at last and Rick breathed with frank relief. Leading off through the shadowy jungle, he wondered what Burt's story would disclose. They'd let Burt tell it after they'd fed him and made him rest.

But on the trek to camp, Burt got him aside a moment and murmured one word. "Latimayne."

"He's here?" clipped Rick. Burt nodded his head. "So we've got a fight on our hands, eh?" Rick grunted. "Well, if he asks for it, he'll get it. The whole of Africa is too small to hold us both."

THERE was consternation in the little camp beside the lake when the weary rescue party, half carrying the ragged Rollins, arrived. It was dark and the last leg of the journey had been a difficult one in the jungle. Professor Bates greeted them cheerfully, and reported that nothing had happened at the camp.

Rollins was promptly attended by Doctor Forte in one of the tents protected by netting, but he did not fall asleep until he had met the others of the party and told his entire story. Lying on a cot, he gazed at the canvas roof. The gorilla, with her baby, lay curled up on the canvas floor in apparent content, but with one black eye open and watchful.

For weeks, since he had made an escape from Latimayne and Sparr, Rollins had existed on bananas, wild celery, bamboo shoots and water. He knew he had been on the verge of madness.

"They had my guns," he recalled, "and had me bound. One day I got loose and the only thing I could get my hands on was the machete. My hat was gone and I was afraid to risk the sun bareheaded, so I made a run for the deepest thicket I could find. Hid there till dark, then began creeping eastward. Didn't know where I was going or why, but I think it was with the idea that I could stay alive and warn you."

"Everything is jake now, Burt," said Rick, with feeling. "You get yourself a good sleep now. We're all here and we'll be loaded with treasure in no time. Go to sleep."

"Listen, Rick," insisted Rollins. "About Sylvia. One day I came to the edge of a clearing, realizing that I was lost. The sun there almost blinded me, but I could see and hear enough to know that this big gorilla was crouched about fifty feet away in the grass, screaming like a woman being murdered. Then I saw what was wrong. A snake—a python—was swinging out of a tree, unwinding about a thousand feet of himself. His hammer head was aimed at a baby gorilla cringing beneath him. I hollered but the little ape was frozen, hypnotized, screaming like hell."

"Then they *do* hypnotize their prey!" ejaculated Professor Bates. "I've heard of such things. Go on, Burt."

"Well, the whole thing happened in a flash and I guess now that I didn't stop to think what a chance I was taking. But I jumped in with the machete and swung with both hands. Hit with all my strength. Baby! The python was writhing and my blow didn't land solid; he grabbed the young gorilla and swung back toward me with his head free. I felt the smash of his weight and his fangs ripped my sleeve."

"We found the sleeve, Burt," said Rick. "It kept us going in the right direction."

Burt grinned cheerfully. "Yeah, man! You can see here," he raised a brown forearm, "where the fangs scraped. And then I got mad and maneuvered around until I got a free swing at the snake's head. Cut it off, too—damn near. Anyway the gorilla baby dropped and I got in another solid cut that finished Mister Python."

Charlie Bates sat listening intently, a picture of apprehension; anything but a rough-and-tumble man's man.

"But wha-what happened then?" he inquired nervously as Burt paused. His brilliant eyes roved from the curled up gorilla to the bearded face of Rollins. "Weren't you afraid of what the mother gorilla might do?"

Burt chuckled. "I don't know now whether I was or not. But Sylvia took charge as soon as I disposed of the snake. She practically led me to her hollow tree."

"And you lived there," gasped young Bates, "until they found you today?"

Rollins nodded, smiling, and glanced at Colby. His glance seemed to say, "What kind of he-man you got here, big boy?" Rick shrugged. Professor Bates changed the subject and told Colby that the source of the lake's water supply had been discovered while they were away. "It's a pipe line of hollowed tree trunks, pretty well rotted. We must follow it further and find out where it comes from."

Colby stood up. "Well, we'd better get some shut eye. We blow the dam in the morning, and will need all the rest we can get."

He dropped off to a restless slumber, his last thoughts concerning Latimayne. He wondered where the so-and-so was hiding at the moment and when they might expect him to strike.

V

THE camp fires burned low. Only the mosquitos buzzing against their netting murmured of life as the white men slept. A few stars winked in the deep indigo sky and the bosom of the lake was silent and smooth as dully polished black lacquer. The hushed voices of the native porters faded off to nothingness. They were still afraid; afraid to stay, more afraid now to go.

They were trapped in the land of taboo.

An agonized scream of terror brought Colby and the rest of the whites up with a jump from their sleep. Scrambling from the folds of his netting, Colby poised warily, rifle in hand. The voice had been that of a native.

He shot a swift look toward the porters' camp farther down the lake shore. The fires were almost dead. "What in hell was it?" he called to Doctor Forte.

The answer came like a tropic storm. Yells rose in a fierce din from the blacks, and above it sounded the long drawn-out scream of one man, followed by a splash.

The rest of the porters, Colby saw as he dashed forward, were climbing nearby trees, shouting in horror. With a shudder of dismay he heard a strange clattering, threshing movement in the thick foliage along the shore. Then it seemed that the sound was beside him, before him, behind him—all about.

"Fire!" roared Rick. "Throw wood on the fires, everybody!" He rushed swiftly, hurled some logs himself, spun around and saw with a sudden feeling of horror the creatures they were facing.

Flames sprang up with a roar. The bedlam of the native cries arose more terrifying as the light spread. Colby's rifle jerked to his shoulder and he stiffened, sucking in his breath. He'd never seen such monsters, their great slavering jaws agape, snapping, their hideous jagged teeth dripping. Crocodiles! Huge, waddling, endless creatures that must have been old when the world was young. Rick fired, aiming for the eye of the nearest creature. Doctor Forte called out, hurling logs on another fire. The thunderous bark of Colby's rifle boomed in the jungle night and a wild din of birds and monkeys filled the trees.

Burt Rollins, an express rifle in his hand, came out of his tent into the inferno of flame-brightened jungle and behind him in the tent crouched Sylvia, the gorilla, scowling savagely, her teeth champing. Rollins propped the rifle on a case of tea and joined the fight.

The night seemed filled with the bark of guns, the angry hissing of the monsters and the combined shouting of whites, blacks and the gorilla who beat her massive chest and gnashed her gleaming teeth.

For what semed an eternity they fought desperately, keeping the beasts off, killing, maiming. The wounded crocodiles were battered and smashed with big clubs that Colby, Hilburn and the doctor swung with fierce strength, while the others tended the fires and called warnings.

At last, the monsters were driven off. A volley of shots drove the last ones off the sloping bank and into the lake, where turmoil reigned amid lashing waters.

Over this wild nightmarish scene broke the African moon, a silver ball that acted like a magic wand. As the eerie light crept over the lake the whole world seemed to draw a deep breath and sigh. Colby looked about him at his companions as they all drew closer together. The air was permeated with a bitter acrid smell. The lake surface became smooth once more.

Colby drew a sleeve across his face and flung down his nicked war club. He glanced at Burt Rollins, an odd expression on his square-jawed face. "We were lucky, Burt," he said, shaking his tousled head. "We must have lifted our ship offa that death trap just in time."

"And lucky, too," added panting Professor Bates, "that we didn't come back here in a seaplane to land on this lake. Well—that settles sleep for me. I need a drink."

"Nonsense, professor," declared Rick. "The thing is quite clear now. We must keep good fires going at night. We'll be perfectly safe while we keep it light. I say 'back to bed'—all of us. We have plenty of work in the morning."

THE first slow light of the jungle dawn saw the camp of the white men teeming with activity. Rick Colby was everywhere. Their lesson of the night before was well learned. None of them knew what new dangers they faced, what fate held in store for them. But they were here and determined to see the thing through. If the ancient city of Oron was buried beneath the lake they would resurrect it, and be damned to the man or beast that blocked their path.

The first move was changing camp site. The cowering black porters chopped and hacked at the trees, clearing a broad area further back from the lake shore. Colby, himself, with two blacks, climbed down into the ravine to set a dynamite charge at

the base of the moss-grown dam. He worked like a Trojan, the sweat on his face mixed with the spray from the spillway.

Stringing a wire after him as he climbed back to the plateau, he hooked up the battery, then glanced about him.

"Everything all ready?" he shouted eagerly.

"Yeah, all set!" answered Rollins from a distance. "Camp all moved back. Give her the gun, Rick!"

The whole party tingled with excitement. This would be a shot heard, perhaps, around the world. In a short while their eyes would look on the exposed tomb of the ages. Colby handed his tools to a black porter and ordered him to retreat. There was no telling what effect the explosion might have on the brink of the ravine.

"Here she goes, everybody!" he yelled triumphantly.

Deliberate and steady, he rammed down the plunger. For a fleeting instant a tense quiet gripped the vast jungle. Then came the blast of dynamite. A great booming, thunderous rumble. The whole earth shook. A choking echo, like the rushing of a big train through a tunnel, filled the jungle and the ears of the watchers. Rick grabbed a tree near the edge of the ravine and clung grimly, a smile on his rugged face. This was action, the kind he loved.

Smoke shot up from the deep base of the dam below them; shot up like the steaming breath of a volcano. Doctor Forte and the others rushed wildly to join Rick. They saw the crumbling earth and rocks, the crash and smash of flying dirt, and the bulging of the ground. A hole! A hole at the stream level. Rick's charge had been placed perfectly.

Rushing water broke from its prison with a roaring hiss, racing down the narrow stream bed in the ravine, sweeping all before it, laden with bouncing, writhing creatures, dead and alive, clawing, reaching, battered by tree and rock.

"The inferno!" cried Blackmore, his gray eyes staring. Then he turned his head and started. He shouted dramatically: "But see there! Watch out, everybody!"

All faces were turned toward the lake itself, blank with awe. Rising from the surface less than an eighth of a mile from where they stood was a gigantic silvery shining bubble. Up, up, up it went, swelling wide and high, big as a circus tent, smooth as the dome of the heavens. On its surface sheen, reflected in weird, shimmering arcs, was reflected the shore of the lake with its trees, the sky and the fleecy clouds. In silence, fascinated, they watched the phenomenon. Saw it expand, lifting, rounder, rounder—almost a ball. Then, with a mighty boom like a clap of thunder, it burst and sent a dashing spray like rain in a vast circle.

Doctor Forte was making notes hurriedly, sketching. Hilburn shot the thing with a camera, his mouth agape. Then they saw the broad bosom of the lake tremble. It shivered like the skin of a sleeping monster, and the water began to leap and toss. More great bubbles formed and broke, popping like rifle shots, and a creamy froth began to form over the whole surface.

Colby cupped his hands over his ears. The whole bowl formed by the towering jungle that bordered the lake was droning with a steady volume of sound, a din such as none of them had ever heard.

"The blacks don't like it much," he laughed, pointing to the cowering porters crouched in the brush. Petrified with fear, the natives peered at the heaving lake through their fingers, hiding their faces in terror.

Moving cautiously along the lake shore, they watched in awe as the lake dropped. They could no longer see through the water, for it was thick with silt and slime and bubbling froth. Denizens of the deep splashed and leaped here and there as the water lowered. A thin steaming vapor began to rise.

Burt Rollins made himself a cigarette and passed the makings to Rick. Rick grinned at his sidekick. It had been a long road and a tough one, but they had arrived at last. They had discovered the lost city of Oron!

VI

THE sweltering tropic sun in the sky of brass blazed down on the lake and threw dazzling, dancing reflections up under the sun helmets of the adventurers as they watched the rapidly lowering water. Soon, amid the turbulent, choppy water,

they saw the topmost pinnacle of a man-made edifice. Slowly, a green-gold swelling dome came into sight.

"My heavens!" cried Doctor Forte enthusiastically, his eyes fairly popping from his head. "It's true, Rick! If we found nothing more, you and Burt would still earn a niche in the Hall of Fame. See!" His voice lowered and he said reverently, "It's Oron, unquestionably. The lost civilization. Don't you agree with me, Professor Bates?"

The professor started at his name. "Huh? What's—oh—yes! Yes, indeed. My mind was drifting, trying to picture this wild jungle land as it might have looked ages ago. It's thousands of years —and today it rises from the flood!"

"Science . . ." laughed Rick Colby, poking Rollins playfully. "These gentlemen are going to delve for science, Burt. But what are we going to delve for, you old gorilla tamer?"

Rollins took his eyes from the miracle before them and glanced at his broad-shouldered pardner. Doctor Forte's quick and efficient medical aid, together with the flyer's amazing recuperative powers, had served to put Rollins up neatly on two good legs, hale and hearty. There was no trace of his recent ordeal.

"You and I," he retorted solemnly, "will delve in mud for the treasure. I'm tired of going on the beach between jobs. We'll make this a ten-strike, Rick."

"It's a temple, or palace of some sort," declared Professor Bates as the huge dome rose higher and they beheld thick towering columns. Great stones, piled one upon another. All about there bobbed up peaks and smaller domes or minarets, their dull, golden gleam emerging from the receding water, while millions of flapping, leaping, wriggling things fought and tore through the exposed arches and gaps.

Hour after hour they watched, spellbound by the miracle of beauty, awed by the teeming millions of creatures, large and small, that squirmed and splashed in the slime and silt of the ever-widening sides of the lake bed, once the sloping heights of a ravine or blind canyon.

Then they began to prepare for the descent. Trees were chopped to construct rough ladders. The light, strong ropes were coiled at hand. A supply of triple-length clubs like long baseball bats were hewn from tree limbs and saplings for use in combating the creatures seen slithering through the water below them.

The professor and the doctor paused often during the work to gaze in fascination at the buildings which grew before their eyes. As Rick Colby halted beside them, his attention was drawn by something on a buttressed roof below. Colby's blue eyes narrowed, and he snapped his fingers suddenly.

"Motors!" he cried out. "It's the metal structure and motors of Latimayne's seaplane. What do you say, Burt?" Rollins rushed to the edge and took a single glance. "Right," he agreed. "That's where it sank, Rick."

There was a shrill scream, keen as a knife, and to a man Rick and his companions swung about, reaching for weapons. Only a moment before they had seen Charlie Bates crouched at the edge of the slimy slope, engrossed at the spectacle. The professor shouted. Charlie's struggling body was hanging half in the air, half clutching at a slipping, dirt-covered slab of stone that, even as they glanced, went skittering off the edge of the crumbling bank. Like a daring bareback rider, Charlie poised for an instant. Rick was already hurling himself toward the spot. Then, downward, screaming in mortal terror, went young Bates. His body turned and spun, whirling dizzily like a chip, all the way to the seething, crawling mass of the lake bottom.

"Help!" bellowed Professor Bates with staring, stricken eyes. "My God! She—" He dashed toward the brink frantically, but Hilburn caught him.

RICK COLBY shouted for the blacks and snatched up a machete. The loop of a rope was hurled about his waist and he leaped. One instant he was poised, aiming, then he was gone, cleaving the air in a spectacular leap. Down, down he went, his jaws set grimly, his eyes closed against the landing in the slime. Splash! His body struck the deep centuries-old mud of the terrace scarcely twenty feet from where young Bates had bumped into a masonry butt and now lay as if dead.

Struggling desperately in the grip of the soft ooze, Colby staggered to his feet, groping about him in the mud, searching

From the bank above, the watchers saw him retrieving the machete. Half stunned by his plunge, he tottered a moment, staring toward Bates' inert body. Already a score of crocodiles were creeping toward them. Colby swore and started struggling toward the unconscious youngster. The mud sucked at his feet on the treacherous slope.

"Watch out, Rick!" he heard Burt Rollins yell. The flyer lay flat on his belly at the plateau edge, rifle in hand. Then his rifle boomed. Colby heard the plop of the bullet tearing into the nearest monster. More shots rang out. The muddy slopes reverberated with the rattle and crash of gunfire. Colby saw the beast nearest him rise and snap right and left, then splash around and come at him with gaping jaws.

A shout went up from the rim above. Colby swung the machete savagely and tore a ragged gash in the crocodile's throat. The horny head lunged at him, fangs bared, a steaming hiss coming from its throat. Again he dodged and slashed, and again, floundering drunkenly in the mud, cutting fiercely against the clumsy, writhing body.

"Stand by, Burt!" he cried, half choking as he backed and sidestepped to reach Bates, fighting like a madman every inch of the way. From the corner of his eye he saw a second crocodile floundering nearer, its hideous head pointing, reaching for the sprawled Bates. He heard the yelling of those above him and the volleying rifle shots. Bates must be unconscious. He never moved. Rick yelled "Charlie!" but the youngster remained inert. Swinging his machete, Rick moved to Bates' side, just as the nearest crocodile lunged at him.

Colby met the charge with a drive of his long blade. He felt the shock as he drove the point deep behind the eyes of the thing, and saw the blood spout. Like a sputtering fuse the creature whipped and wriggled, jaws snapping as it sank to the mud.

A volley of slugs thudded into the the crocodile's head, and Colby whirled to grab for Bates' outflung arm just as a second beast stretched its chopping jaws. With one hand Colby dragged at the limp body, and slashed savagely with the other. Young Bates was a dead weight, gripped by the suction of the mud. The excited cries of the men above gave him warning. He turned his head. Another monstrous killer was almost upon him, snapping its jaws fearfully.

Smashing out with both hands clubbing the blade, Dick bashed the hard head savagely, felt the weapon shatter. In that instant the snapping jaws of the crocodile struck him sidewise. Dick felt a jerk on the rope from above. He flung himself in a football tackle toward Bates. With fingers of steel he grabbed desperately with both hands, and from above rose a shout as the rope was jerked taut.

"Hang on, Rick!" It was the hysterical voice of Professor Bates. With a mighty heave, the men above drew Rick with his burden swiftly up the slippery slope. Rick was nearly spent. He locked his arms around Bates and let the men above haul them upward to the solid ground at the top.

Rick sprawled full length before his tent, gasping. He was caked with thick muck from head to feet, his clothing almost in shreds. Even his heavy boots were gashed by the claws of the beasts.

A few yards from him, he saw the professor and the rest of the party working over young Bates with frantic concern.

At first Rick thought it was a dream or some trick of his hearing. He pushed aside Burt, who, with a basin and cloth, was wiping away the slime from his face and neck. The professor's voice was perfectly distinct.

"Thank heaven!" Rick heard him exclaim. "She's safe. See, Doctor, her breathing is— Look! Her eyes are opening."

"She'll be all right soon," Doctor Forte replied soothingly.

Rick struggled to his feet, his shaking hand fastened on Rollins' arm, and started toward the little group. There, propped on a rolled blanket, lay a blonde girl, with fluttering dark brown eyes. She wore the muddy male attire of Charlie Bates, whom Colby had just dragged from the jaws of a horrible death.

"Well, I'll be—a double-damn fool," murmured Rick, staring. Burt Rollins grinned and eyed the heavens. Rick growled under his breath. So that explained a lot of things. Charlie Bates was really a girl. Her dark, perfectly fitting wig had been dragged off in the struggle. The safari had a woman member!

VII

DOCTOR FORTE, as surprised as Rick or anybody else, pronounced Miss Bates suffering only from shock and a few scratches. The professor, struggling with mixed emotions, stammered out apologies and explanations. The girl was his sister, of course, not his brother, and her right name was Charlotte. She'd been called Charlie at home as a sort of nickname.

Rick glared, his anger roused. "A dirty trick, I call this," he growled at the professor. He remembered his treatment of Charlie Bates and turned red. That kick in the pants. He was a little confused and unprepared for anything like this. It was bad enough when they had to contend with a coddled brother who was no help with anything. But, a woman! Wowie!

"I'm sorry," mumbled the professor. "I didn't intend to trick you. It just couldn't be helped, Rick."

"But why burden us in the jungle with a woman?" demanded Rick, who saw no reason for wasting words. The girl and her brother had played them all for dupes. "We've been in danger ever since we left the river and we're never out of danger until we get back to civilization. The responsibility—"

"Yes, I know," nodded the professor humbly. "It's my fault. But she's a very stubborn girl and forced me to—well, truthfully, it was a question of necessity. I thought she'd be safer with me—with us—than if I left her alone in Matadi. I'm dreadfully sorry, gentlemen."

Colby looked at the girl, now seated before her tent, arrayed in clean clothes and presenting a rather attractive picture. She was really a beautiful young woman. Looking at her, minus the disguising wig, her gorgeous golden hair curled about her face, Rick wondered how he had been unable to penetrate her disguise.

He turned his attention to the valley below them, noting the speed with which the water was going down. By morning they could risk the descent, but then again, the girl came back to his thoughts. How were they going to proceed, to go down into that writhing sink with a girl? And why, glancing at her once more, couldn't she have turned out to be some pie-faced, homely dame instead of this lovely creature?

The girl herself, as if reading his thoughts, broke the embarrassing silence. "I don't see, Mister Colby," she began, and he noted the *mister* as she emphasized it, "why, because I am accidentally discovered to be a girl, it should make any difference to you or anybody else. I was the same female when I started from Matadi with you. A woman in the jungle is nothing new. Martin Johnson's wife has been all over Africa. There were two women with a party that went into the Amazon jungle a few years ago. I'm not afraid, and I'll not ask any favors."

"You don't understand, Miss Bates," said Rick, slowly, feeling the strangeness in addressing the person they'd all been calling Charlie. "This expedition is different. We are in constant danger here, not so much from jungle beasts and natives as from white men—our own race."

Burt Rollins broke in, trying to minimize the menace.

"Look, Rick," he interjected. "What's all the excitement about? There's been no change in fact. Latimayne's likely enough beaten his way back to Stanleyville, 'r Nairobi 'r some place. Besides, I think it's kind of—well—cozy having a beautiful lady on our picnic."

The company laughed. Rick shrugged his shoulders, and shouted for the porters to build up the fires. Hilburn sought to change the subject. He suggested a "sundowner," the evening cocktail in equatorial Africa.

They drank. Rick was induced to shake hands with Charlotte Bates, who smiled at him brilliantly. She said: "Snap out of it, old-timer. It's not as bad as it looks. I'll be just as good as I can."

"Well, you're here," grunted Rick, thawing a little.

"Maybe I'll bring you luck," she said lightly.

"We'll need all the luck you can tote," Rick replied.

At intervals through the night he awoke, troubled, wondering what had come over him. Each time, a coincidence, he remembered Charlotte Bates and her golden curls. In the morning, with the rush to get down into the now uncovered city of mystery, he mumbled a "good morning" to

her and glared at her brother, the professor.

Eager as they were all to search the silent city on the slopes below, it was a task now that called for plenty of stomach. Weapons were checked and passed out. The ropes were anchored fast, and Rick Colby, leading the way, slid over the rim and down.

THIS was what Latimayne had been waiting for. The draining of the lake; the uncovering of the truth. Gold! Burnished golden domes and strange images stood bared in the sunlight of the new day. Before the imposing palace high on a terrace of countless massive stone steps, stood the golden giant, a huge, fantastic elephant fashioned of gold, its golden howdah studded with gleaming, fiery jewels, its great shining tusks tipped with the yellow metal and set with flaming gems.

The voices of Colby and his friends echoed from deep down in the valley where they shot and clubbed their path through the marine creatures to the edge of the deep, swift stream flowing through the center of the valley. This, no doubt, had been the original water supply of the ancient city's builders, an artificial stream brought from some miles up the plateau and carried in pipes hewn from large trees.

"Throw logs across," directed Colby, waving to the porters who had packed the timbers down from the rim. "Make bridge." The water was too deep and too swift for wading, and it still teemed with splashing, scrambling, hissing masses of submarine life, crowded close and fighting viciously for self-preservation.

A hastily constructed bridge was thrown across. Latimayne, from his lookout with Congo Sparr, saw the party start up, shooting right and left at the squirming things in their path, toward the palace, the center of ancient Oron. He'd seen enough. The wealth was here and he would have it. But he'd take it by stealth with small risk to his own hairy neck. This job of ransacking the city would take those excited American fools some days. Meanwhile he and Sparr —Latimayne's musings halted abruptly and he jerked his head forward, staring.

"Sparr!" he rasped hoarsely. "Look and see if my eyes are tricking me. Look! One of them is a woman—a girl. She stumbled and her helmet was knocked off. A blonde—with yellow hair!"

"There is nothing the matter with your sight, Victor," confirmed Congo Sparr, "and nothing the matter with the girl, either, eh? What a prize for the taking!"

Latimayne had seen enough. He grabbed Congo Sparr and pulled him back from the opening in the brush.

"Come," he said decisively. "We have got some ground to cover. Lead me to that old slave trader's trail. We have no time to lose."

Congo Sparr's bloodshot eyes narrowed and he kicked his way through the tangle ahead of Latimayne. Congo was a lazy brute, but the vision of the golden-haired girl and her ivory-white skin spurred him on. He began winding his way through the jungle like an animal, breaking quickly into a trot, and, with Victor Latimayne grim and silent at his heels, they disappeared, swallowed up by the darkening shadows.

The shouting voices of the treasure hunters faded away as the renegades ran, and soon they heard no other sounds. Only the hum and buzz of the jungle thickets, the flurry and scramble of the squirrels and tree lizards, the soft, frightened flight of the *hyrax*, or rabbit.

They did not remain to see Rick Colby lead the rush to the top of the slimy, cluttered terrace stairs and enter the high-arched center door of the palace, nor to hear the chorus of cheers that followed, echoing through the high-ceilinged halls dripping and green with moss.

"Behold!" shouted Professor Bates, his sister at his side. "The myths of our forefathers become established truths!"

A meeting was held beneath the entrance arch. From there they could see up and down the little valley, see where at one end, the water poured in from a flume masked by a tangle of vines and creepers, and at the other, in the wedge of a slight curve, the moss-grown dam with the ragged hole in its base where Colby's dynamite blast had opened it. At this hole, even at the distance, they could discern the piled-up confusion of dead and dying reptilian monsters, fighting the stream that still drove through, fighting each other, struggling to crawl out, others determined to stay. The flaming sun was swiftly burn-

ing the slippery mud of the basin into a silvery gray cement-like surface, dry and hard as flint, gripping the legs and bodies of trapped monsters and holding them fast.

RICK agreed to a working plan suggested by Professor Bates and the doctor. They spent the first three days exploring the countless chambers, the mysterious passages, going from the palace to the buildings that flanked it along the slope. At every side they found new marvels of the ancient civilization, more wonders of the early goldsmiths' art, hoards of precious stones, set and unset.

When they commenced to dig for treasure, however, they were forced to burrow through layers of mud and silt. Vaults were discovered hidden beneath the slimy coating of what had for centuries been the lake bottom. There were times when, smeared and caked with mud, their hands and faces scraped and scratched by their labors in deep stone pits or crypts which they were forced to drain, that they believed they had uncovered the whole wealth of the city. But they went on exploring every nook and passage.

Charlotte proved herself decidedly more useful as a woman than she had been as a man; and Rick was forced to admit as much to Burt as the two were digging in a deep stone-walled vault on the third morning.

"She has a lot of courage," said Burt, wiping his streaked face.

"She was terrible as a man," snapped Rick.

"Good enough to fool you—and all of us."

"She didn't fool me," growled Rick. "I was a fool to start with. I felt there was something queer about it when I met him —her, I mean. But, it being the professor, I let it go."

"Don't be a hunk, Rick," insisted Burt. "The girl put it over on all of us, you included. She's clever."

"Okay, okay," grunted Rick. "Have it your way, Burt. All I admit is that she has—something. I certainly got off on the wrong foot with her, though."

"Sure," laughed Burt, then, "Here, Rick, give a hand." The two of them pried with their bars, heaving, straining. The huge stone grated in its fitting and lifted slowly. Rick braced and Burt flung a wedge into the gap. Then they pried again. And again, until at last, they beheld in the shadowy cavern beneath them a long rectangular surface of damp poisonous green verdigris. In this surface they could make out vaguely many strange marks and designs. Rick shrugged and shouted to one of the blacks to bring Hilburn with his camera.

"Maybe it's full of jewels," said Burt, speculating. "But it looks more like a coffin or casket."

The others came hurrying with Pete Hilburn. After he had photographed it and the doctor and professor guessed at the inscriptions, it was lifted out on ropes with the aid of the porters. Rick pried the heavy lid up and a deadly odor burst from it like a gas. The men shouted and ran frantically. When it was deemed safe to return, they examined the casket wonderingly. There was nothing there, only damp, greenish dust.

Doctor Forte shook his head thoughtfully. "A casket, no doubt," he said, "and a powerful gas has generated while it was sealed up down there for centuries. Good thing you fellows brought it up to open it, or—"

"Or—what?" demanded Rick.

"You and Burt," replied the doctor, "would probably be ready for two similar containers right now."

THE black porters lugged and hauled, carrying the movable treasure to a central point, which was a niche in the entrance hall of the palace. Colby had decided to bring the rest of their camp equipment and supplies down from the plateau, and to set up the camp on the plaza before the palace entrance.

"It's a good idea," Doctor Forte had agreed readily. "This place is fairly dried out here now and it will save us climbing up and down."

Colby sent the porters off on the run and most of the camp was brought down. The blacks trudged away on their last trip to the rim. Sitting on a case of rice, Rick watched them disappear from view. Rollins was sprawled out in the shade, talking earnestly to Sylvia, whose son was now becoming friendly with all of the party.

From beyond the rim there arose a wild shout of surprise and fear. Then a chorus

of frightened black voices, and the rattle of gunfire. Colby leaped to his feet. A bullet screamed over his head and thudded into the palace wall.

"Quick!" cried Rick, "everybody inside the palace. Doctor, could I have a look with your glasses?"

One look at the figure that appeared first on the plateau rim was enough. Colby cursed softly and his blue eyes burned fiercely.

"Latimayne!" he called back over his shoulder, then turned and ducked under a scattering rain of slugs. "It's that Cape Town crook," he nodded to the doctor, "and he's got a whole gang of blacks. Blacks in leopard skins, and every one of them armed."

VIII

A BULLET from the plateau had torn Pete Hilburn's leg as he ran. Doctor Forte hurriedly made a rough dressing for it and a council of war was held with Willie Blackmore standing guard at a shadowy narrow opening in the wall.

Leaden slugs spattered against the walls and an incessant din rolled down from the shouting natives. Rick Colby's face was grave. Latimayne had timed his attack well. Not as well as he might have hoped, however, for most of the camp outfit and supplies were beyond his reach when he launched his surprise raid.

"We have no water yet," said the professor, ducking instinctively as a slug ricocheted through the arch and zinged across the chamber.

"No water," repeated Colby, "and only part of our ammunition. Latimayne grabbed what was left up there."

Doctor Forte, frankly worried, glanced about them. In the silence of the big stone building, the bark and scream of rifle and slug rang shrilly. "I'm not much of a warrior, Rick," he confessed, "and it looks to me as if we're surrounded, completely at this hellion's mercy."

"Surrounded, yes," admitted Rick. "But we're not finished, by a long shot. Just keep out of range until night comes. We'll make Mister Latimayne laugh on the other side of his face. I've got an ace up my sleeve—I hope."

Safe for the time being, the beleaguered Americans kept watch on the rim. Latimayne, with Congo Sparr and a score of leaping, gyrating black savages, stamped back and forth along the edge shooting and yelling with rage. The setting sun was full in their eyes. Latimayne seemed to be beside himself with fury as the sun dropped swiftly and left him in darkness. Darkness. That was what Rick Colby waited for.

Now to turn the tables on his enemy. To wipe him out completely, destroy him as one would a cobra that blocked the path to safety. Between the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon there would be sufficient light on the slope from Latimayne's campfire for Rick to grope along, but not enough to expose him to observation from the raider's camp.

With a last word of warning to his friends, Rick, armed with pistol, knife and two hand-made dynamite bombs, crept from a side entrance of the temple-like structure and halted in a shadow. Here Burt and he swiftly adjusted the top half of a crocodile carcass which they had scooped out for the purpose. The stench of the thing was almost nauseating. Burt lashed him into the thing, which he plauned to use as camouflage.

"I'll cut my way out when I get across," whispered Rick. "There! That's good enough." He got down on all fours, low to the ground. Burt crouched low beside him and grasped Rick's roughened hand tightly.

"You still goin' it alone?" pleaded Burt.

"Sure," replied Rick, peering out from beneath the hide. "Somebody must stay here, Burt. You know—in case anything goes wrong. Somebody that knows the jungle. Savvy? So long, Burt."

Rollins mumbled a farewell and Colby crept away into the night, his crawling gait simulating the awkward movement of a crocodile.

AROUND the campfire on the plateau rim twoscore black and scarred savages danced and chanted. Latimayne and Congo Sparr, elated with the success of their raid and already conceding further triumphs on the morrow, watched the Babali medicine doctor communing with the spirits. The hacked and mutilated body of one of Colby's black porters was being

prepared for a gruesome feast for these Human Leopards.

Sparr, his appetite whetted by the sight of blood, edged closer to the carcass by the fire. Latimayne chewed his under lip nervously. He was awed, a trifle fearful of how this cannibal orgy might develop; as the only white man here—he did not recognize Congo Sparr as a white—he had to strive to control the frenzied dancers with their gruesome trophy. If he could check them until morning, the Americans, especially those two, Colby and Rollins, would furnish enough white meat to swell the bellies of these cannibals.

The crackle of the flames, the fiendish chanting of the Human Leopards, and the shrill incantations of the painted native doctor, drowned all other sound. The jungle trembled with its din. Latimayne's ears and eyes were filled. No one heard the soft tread in the bush until Rick Colby was within hurling distance.

"Hell!" swore Colby as he stepped on a brittle branch that snapped like a pistol shot. With a wild cry the dancers halted. Colby leaped forward for a free swing of his arm. In a mad panic, Congo Sparr caught a glimpse of Colby's shirt as the American hurled the dynamite bomb. In all directions the silhouetted figures dispersed as the crashing thunder blasted the fire and the night. Colby, streaming with sweat and breathing heavily, flung the second bomb. A shrill cry of agony met its vicious roar, and, with pistol cocked, Rick plunged through the bush after Victor Latimayne.

He heard the bark of a gun and felt the whizz of a bullet that fanned his neck. His gun flamed and he rushed forward. Like terror stricken rabbits, the savages scattered into the black forest.

Latimayne ran like a mad man. Rick raced after him, a shot impossible in the zig-zag flight around tree boles and dense thickets. Everywhere, it seemed, he heard frantic crashing in the brush as the blacks dashed for shelter.

After a few minutes he halted. The jungle was black as a tomb. He held his breath, listening. A footfall, a gasp for breath, might yet betray him; perhaps he was within arm's reach of Latimayne at this moment. He felt a warm trickle of his own blood inside his breeches leg where a spear, perhaps, had grazed him. Then he heard—swearing softly at the sound—the battle cry of Burt Rollins, rocketing up from the valley, followed by the voice of Blackmore.

Burt Rollins shot up over the edge of the slope and swept the night with a spearing flashlight, shouting Rick's name recklessly. Blackmore bobbed up at his elbow. Rick started toward them with a warning. As he did, a sound came from their right, and they swung nervously. For an instant the light of the flash fell full on Blackmore, blinding him.

A pistol barked. Willie Blackmore gasped, clutching his breast and sank down in the path, coughing horribly. Rick cursed, half choked with rage. Behind Rollins, he saw the gleaming fangs of Sylvia the gorilla.

"He's a goner," whispered Burt. "Damn them! Willie!" But Blackmore was dead. "Come on," snarled Rick. "Somebody pays for this!"

As he spoke, the jungle rocked with a fierce chorus of yells and a circle of the Human Leopards rushed toward them. A huge black with a poised spear closed in on Rollins. Rick fired right and left. Burt cried out in anger and shot, but the cannibals came on. Two more leaped in to the kill. Rick caught a vague flash as Sylvia, her jaws snapping, flung Rollins aside with a sweep of her mighty paw. In an instant her great body was filled like a pin cushion with a volley of spears.

Burt yelled hoarsely and charged, pistol spitting. When his ammunition was exhausted, he plied about him like a maniac with his machete. Rick followed slowly, shooting carefully. Suddenly, the blacks fled in a panic before the white men's efficient killing.

Burt and Rick turned back. Sylvia was breathing her last. She looked at Burt with a dog-like expression of devotion, moaned once like a hurt child, and died.

Rick said quietly: "Your life or hers, and she made the choice. Come on, Burt."

Then, as he spoke, they were startled by a fierce shooting and yelling from the valley. Reloading their guns as they went, they plunged madly down the slope to the stark, shadowy plaza where they halted, panting, their ears filled with the scuffling and yelling of the Leopard Men.

Rick crept forward silently, almost stumbled over the stiffening body of a black man. He motioned to Rollins, his eyes bulging with mingled fear and rage. What he saw raised the hair on the back of his neck. "Together, Burt," he whispered. "Now!"

Two quick steps and they opened fire, smashing their slugs into the startled cannibals. They sought no quarter and gave none. The killing fire that they poured into the shouting savages dropped a half dozen in their tracks, spears half raised. The others fled like frightened jackals.

A single glance showed Rick a scene of carnage. He and Rollins rushed first to Hilburn and Doctor Forte, who were quickly unbound. Professor Bates lay in a welter of his own blood, dead, his pistol still in his hand and smoking, his body pierced by many spears.

"They burst out on us from the rear," the doctor choked on the words. "Never a sound, and then—"

"But where's the girl?" Rick broke in anxiously. "What happened, doctor? Pete! What happened?"

"They carried her off!" said the bandaged Hilburn.

BAFFLED and enraged, Rick Colby paced up and down like a caged beast. With clenched fists he glared around him at the dim-lit high-ceiling chamber, at the body of poor Professor Bates. They were indeed in a sad plight. Four men, one of them wounded, with a useless treasure on their hands and the girl to find. He shook his head in bitter self-condemnation, mumbling to himself. What in hell had he been thinking of to leave the party in such a dangerous position?

He forgot his own wounds as he stared at Hilburn. Regardless of injuries they had to act. They must find the girl—at once! Rick knew that the Human Leopards under Latimayne's leadership were worse than ghouls.

Rick's rage drove him, and he drove the others. All of the treasure that was movable, all of their equipment they would need to travel with, was rushed in the dark up the slope behind the palace to the plateau and there hidden in the jungle. The four then returned to the palace and fires were built.

"You fellows," he said to Rollins, Hilburn and Doctor Forte after they had determined on a plan and laid the professor in a hastily dug grave beyond the rim, "will have to stay awake and be ready for anything. If I don't get back here, or you don't hear from me somehow, in twenty-four hours—get out of here as fast as you can and notify the authorities at Stanleyville."

He filled his pockets with ammunition, waved a silent hand to the trio and started up the slope, resolved to find Charlotte Bates, alive or dead, and to kill Latimayne, if it were the last act of his life. He had hardly reached the plateau rim, climbing swiftly, when he became aware that he was followed. He turned his head. Already accustomed to the dark, he recognized Burt Rollins trailing him.

Colby did not speak but went on. He was too busy with his thoughts and the burning urge to kill. Rollins did not speak, either, but kept behind Colby, doggedly. Two were left behind to stand guard and to make Latimayne, if he was toying with them, believe they were trapped at the palace. Through the jungle night, slowly, methodically, the silent, grim pair circled and criss-crossed.

For hours they hunted, neither offering a word, Rollins following Rick's steps, every now and then shooting a quick beam into the darkness from the flash he had brought. Grunting, snorting small beasts darted from their path, a bird twittered above them, a startled monkey chattered from a tree. Insects clouded about their heads, buzzing fiercely. Still they kept on, beating through the tangles of creepers, vines and thickets.

Morning came and mist rising with the sun clouded their vision, but Colby did not pause. Not a word had passed between them; not until the sun was four hours high did they exchange a word. Rick halted abruptly and pointed to the trampled vegetation.

"See that?" he said. "On the moss there."

"Boot prints," agreed Rollins. "Two white men."

"Let's go, boy!"

They proceeded cautiously. Rick flung up his gun hand in warning as they turned in the tunnel-like path. A high dark mound

rose in the sunlight before them. A mound green with choked vegetation.

"Careful now," whispered Rick, going forward cautiously. Rollins, a step behind, stared in awe. Masked as it was by the jungle growth of centuries, they could make out the crude lines of an ancient temple or fortress.

When they found the entrance, with the prints of many feet in the high grass, it proved barely wide enough for one man at a time. Colby crept forward slowly, and as Rollins pressed behind they heard suddenly the deep, muffled thunder of tom-toms and the chanting of many voices.

The narrow, high-walled passage was vine covered and dank. It twisted and turned until Rick swiftly threw his hand back and touched Rollins. The gloom here was thick and chill. Rick peered into the dark and saw a steep crumbling stone stair, littered with the broken shells of birds' eggs and turtle shells and a million crawling lizards.

AS they rounded a turn in the passage, they stared through a long dark hall at a sight that froze the blood in their veins. Far down the passage opened into a great domed chamber in the center of which was a long stone bench or table. Around this a horde of hideously painted black men danced and cavorated with strange rhythm and gestures.

Rick's hand closed on Burt's arm like a vise. "Burt, look!" he whispered.

Rollins saw but did not answer. A narrow beam of sunlight, straight and bright as a gleaming golden sword blade, came from an aperture in the domed roof and was moving slowly, gradually across a broad stone table toward the figure lashed there. Ivory white in its nakedness, the body lay motionless, silent, the golden curls forming a pillow for the head.

It was Charlotte Bates! A sacrifice to the spirits. Rick's blood pounded in his ears like thudding fists. A white man did not have to be initiated in the ghastly ceremonial of the cannibal fiends to read the end. It was the sun—the sun with its shaft of light that marked the finale. When that creeping deadly finger of gold crawled across her naked body to point straight at her heart the hellion pack would tear the girl to shreds with the iron claws they were waving.

Rick sought swiftly for sign of Latimayne or Sparr. But they were not to be found. The girl lay utterly still. Undoubtedly she had fainted. There was no time to lose.

"Think you could get out and climb up there?" whispered Rick.

"Blot out the sun!" Burt got the idea at once. Superstition was all powerful with the African tribes. "I'll give it the old college try, Rick."

"Darken it and give me time to get the jump," explained Rick. "Then you turn lose from there with your gun."

Rollins backed out and rushed around through the tangle, to discover fortunately that the temple was covered from the ground to its dome roof with creeping vines. It made a lattice work which he climbed readily. He located the opening through which the sun drove its innocent finger of death. His body would cover it completely. He wondered if, when he flung himself across it, the beast-men below would hurl their spears upward through his belly. It was the chance he took.

"Here goes," mumbled Burt and dropped across the hole, clinging to the vines, his pulse beating madly.

RICK'S whole big body burned with anger as he flattened against the wall. He crept an inch at a time toward the fanatically crazed dancers. He watched, fascinated, as the shaft of sunlight moved closer to the girl's heart. She lay there so still and calm, so white and deathlike, her smooth, trim body tantalizing the iron-clawed hands of the cannibals by its nearness, the closeness of the glowing sun shaft to her breast. What if Burt couldn't make it, couldn't get up there? Sweat oozed all over his own body. His blue eyes blazed in his sun-browned face.

Then, as a man would jerk a string, the vast temple room went black. Rick sprang forward with a yell. The heavy pistol in his fist belched vicious orange flame and his fire smashed down the nearest of the panic-mad dancers as they shouted in consternation.

Pandemonium swirled rampant through the echoing chamber, and suddenly the darkness split open as the sun broke

through where Rollins moved. From the opening in the dome an arm and hand appeared. Burt's gun joined Rick's, sending death and terror into the hearts of the Human Leopards.

From one of the dying savages, Rick ripped the leopard skin which he flung across the nude body of the girl, shooting as he backed off to the wall to reload under cover of Rollins' fire. Then with deadly accuracy he hammered slugs into the tail-enders who fought and clawed toward freedom in the narrow passageway.

Dead and dying blacks were sprawled all about. Rick realized that his shoulder was ripped deep and blood was streaming down his body. He shouted to Burt: "They're coming out!" He hoped Rollins could reload and keep them off, or drive them on into the jungle.

Slashing the crude bonds that held the girl, Rick lifted her in his arms, shaking her a little to revive her, feeling her heart beating faintly. Listening a moment to assure himself, he carried her with some difficulty through the narrow passage, down the steep crumbling stair. Once he stumbled back in alarm as his foot touched the body of a black who had crawled thus far and died. Finally he stepped out into the sun-laced jungle and found Burt on guard. They loaded their weapons once more, listening to the calls and signals of the frightened cannibals fleeing through the forest.

Rick took a glance at the sun for his bearing, and, shielding the limp body of the girl as best he could, started with all speed for the rim of the plateau behind the palace. It was a shorter route than the one they had taken the night before. Before they had gone a mile, they heard a new sound that caused them to stare at each other.

"Guns," panted Rick. "That was the trick, eh!" The sound came from ahead of them, in the valley, no doubt. The doctor and the wounded Pete were shooting it out. Burt gave Rick a weary grin and ran ahead.

Colby turned and followed to find Pete Hilburn and Doctor Forte shooting down into the valley, their faces powder blackened and sweat streaked.

"Here!" yelled Rick, motioning to the doctor. "Here's a job for you." He laid the girl down on the grass tenderly. She was regaining consciousness. "Lie still," he said to her. "You're all safe again. Here she is, Doc."

From the edge of the ill-fated valley rim, Rick saw Latimayne and Sparr with a few blacks scurrying around like wild things, brandishing rifles and glinting spear blades.

Latimayne paused in the glowing shadow of the grotesque golden elephant, and, recognizing Colby, shouted a vile curse. Colby remembering their desperate work of the night before, the removal of the most precious jewels to the jungle, suddenly burst out laughing. He turned to Hilburn. "How did you do it, Pete?"

"We saw them coming, Rick," explained Hilburn, "and I figured at once that if we pretended to let them drive us out and up here, we could trap them in the valley and wait for you to catch up."

Rollins stood guard at the rim while Hilburn made tea, and Forte announced that Charlotte Bates was fighting fever; that the sooner she was gotten out of the jungle the better it would be.

Rick's face was grave. The moment had come. He had one last move to make in his game with hi-jacker Latimayne. "We'll get her out safe enough, Doc," he said determinedly, and moved off to set the stage.

IX

FOUR big fires were to be built, two on each side of the little valley, placed at strategic points so that the light from their flames would show any movement among the buildings in the city. Rick assigned Burt to one, Pete to another, the doctor with Charlotte in his care to the third. Rick, after he had made ready his trump card, would take his place at the fourth fire.

Wood was cut. The fires were laid. The day sped on, and finally Rick waved his signal. They knew that the renegades in the little valley were curious of their movements, but aside from caution, they went about their tasks swiftly. Colby touched a match to his fuse. It sputtered and leaped away from him along the damp plateau edge near the dam where he watched. Then Rick rushed back. There was a gigantic *boom* and a huge mountain of smoke and earth lifted off the rim, sending a shower of stones skyward. The jun-

gle all about them shook and the tree branches whipped trunks with a sound like a torrential rain storm.

"What a man can do," snarled Rick as the avalanche of earth and stones slid down into the valley, "he can undo, Mister Latimayne."

From close above the recently blasted outlet of the stream, tons upon tons of earth rumbled down to close the ragged hole he had but a short time ago opened to drain the age-old lake. The water began at once to back up. There was no other outlet.

Latimayne, too, was quick to see the situation. He cursed and raved, then began to stare about along the rim. Congo Sparr, his red-shot eyes rolling in his head, forgot his hunger for human flesh, forgot the treasure they had so bloodily sought. He forgot the white man's tongue and reverted to the jabbering gutturals of his native forbears.

He saw the water backing up, spreading out, rising swiftly. He was trapped, to die like an imprisoned rat. He screamed in wild panic and, brandishing his pistol, raced in broad daylight up the slope. The calm doctor waited until he was within point blank range. Then he fired.

"Neat work," murmured Rick to himself, watching. "The Doc's got the right idea. Wait until they get where you can't miss."

So the afternoon waned, and the short, soft twilight set in. The blacks had seen the swift death of the man who boasted a powerful philter, or charm. As night threatened with its deepening, crawling dark water, terror rushed among them and they desired to escape. But already the fires were lit and shadows availed them not at all. By ones and twos they ran shouting up the slopes. A rifle barked, once, twice. There was no agony, no writhing death. The slugs of the white men sliced their savage hearts.

In the dusk they saw Latimayne creep to the edge of the temple plaza with a dirty white rag tied to a spear head.

"Colby!" he shouted daringly. "I surrender. Look! I have reformed and can be of service to you."

Rick sneered in disgust. "There is no surrender, Latimayne," he called down. "If you can shoot your way out you can win. Otherwise you stay there and drown."

Latimayne, for answer, whipped up a pistol and fired at Rick, then rushed for shelter inside the arch. He was at his wit's end. Coward that he was, he stared about him in the fading light at the fantastic towering figures in gold that still haunted the fatal place. In the black darkness, perhaps, he thought he might escape and flee through the jungle. The black jungle night—and alone. Terror made him tremble so that he had no warning for what came.

"TURN around, Latimayne," snapped a voice from behind him. "Don't argue and don't try any of your African tricks, you hyena whelp!"

Latimayne stiffened and slowly turned his head. It was Rick Colby. He had slid down along the slope swiftly, fearing that the rising waters might rob him of his vengeance. Latimayne had much to answer for and Rick wanted the answer in person, at arm's reach. He'd have payment for Blackmore, for the professor and for the girl who, no thanks to Latimayne, was alive.

"Drop that pistol," ordered Rick savagely, "and walk out of here where we can all see you while there's light. Come on, move!"

Latimayne shuffled sullenly to the center of the plaza. Now the others could see his every move. Rick walked up to him, facing the man a few paces away, and holstered his own pistol. He balled his hard brown fists and moved toward the man who had tried to murder him, who had murdered his friends. There was a dancing battle light in his blue eyes.

"Latimayne," he said with a smile that bared his even white teeth, "you've been dishing it out, as we say back in our country, and had a lot of your kind of fun. Now we'll see if you can take it. This is my kind of fun. Turn yourself loose."

Rick snapped out his left fist to taunt the man to action, and Latimayne, with the fury of a jungle beast, screamed and charged. Rick side-stepped the mad rush and smashed the hi-jacker flush in the face, smearing his nose flat and knocking him down. As his foe leaped up, bleeding, Rick moved in quickly and blasted him with a left hook in the pit of stomach,

crashing over with a right that struck the jungle pirate dead-center on the chin.

"No you don't!" growled Rick. He smashed his left into Latimayne's face as he felt the other's hand snatch for the pistol in his holster.

Latimayne's eyes were wild as he bent double with a solid smash to his belly. This was not his kind of fighting, out in the open, man to man. Blood dribbled from his open mouth, and he screamed shrilly as Rick crashed a left hook to his chin.

At the crack of the knuckles against the renegade, a voice cried from the plateau rim. " 'At's the ol' champ, Rick. Give 'im the money punch, kid!" It was Burt's voice. Rick grinned.

Latimayne staggered drunkenly, his eyes fixed in desperation on the weapon at Rick's belt. He rushed in to snatch at a dying victory. Rick coolly side-stepped, drawing his foe on.

He cocked his left, took one step sidewise, saw Latimayne's body lift from the rough stone flagging, shot two punches, left, right, to the staggering renegade's jaw and drew back as Latimayne teetered on the edge of the long, steep terraced steps. The renegade toppled backward. He screamed once, then was silent as he bounced and rolled down to the water's lapping edge. His head and an arm went under and he lay there, unmoving, while the water crept up on him by inches.

SCRAMBLING up the slope to where the doctor flung him a rope, Rick climbed to the rim, and wiped his sweating face. A shout soon brought Burt and the limping Pete.

"As a treasure hunter," said the doctor admiringly, "you'd make a pretty good heavyweight contender, Rick."

Rick shrugged. "Nonsense, Doc. He didn't put up much of a fight, but I hardly expected it. That type man without a weapon is as helpless as a woman. But I had to let myself out on him. I sort of—"

"We all understand, Rick," cut in the doctor. "It was a fit ending to a career that must have been the cause of much suffering. And now what?"

"On our way," replied Rick, thoughtfully. "In the morning we'll start north for the river where these ancients piped their water. We'll carry what we can and cache the rest of the treasure safely. At the first trading station we'll halt. Burt and I will come back here with a regular safari to haul out the treasure."

"You've got enough to make you millionaires," said the doctor.

"A couple of crap games," chuckled Burt, "will likely wipe us out in a hurry. Rick likes to take chances, you know. He thrives on risks."

"How about Charlotte?" inquired Rick, his eyes falling on her blanketed figure. "Can she be moved, Doc?"

"In short stages," replied Doctor Forte. "We'll build a raft at the river, of course." Rick nodded. The doctor added, "She asked for you, Rick. Thinks you're a pretty decent citizen, she said."

Rick reddened beneath his tan, and stepped over to the girl's improvised cot. He said rapidly: "I'm sorry, Charlie—I mean, Charlotte—for a lot of things I said, and did. Hope you'll forgive me. You're aces with me and the nerviest girl I ever met. I'm sorry, too about—"

She smiled up at him wanly and pressed his rock-hard hand, nodding. She knew he was thinking of the professor, whose grave was not far away. "I'm rather alone now," she said. "Don't you think you should see me home?"

Home! Rick Colby felt a strange yearning come over him. He'd hoboed it around the globe for a long time. He had people and a home, too. Home! The professor had mentioned the address on Park Avenue, in New York. It would be a long trek from the African jungle to Park Avenue.

"Lady," grinned Rick, squeezing Charlotte's hand ever so slightly, "you've got an escort to your door."

And Rick Colby was a man who kept his word.

A Fiction House Magazine

BUSH DEVIL

By CLYDE IRVINE

***Ai-eee!* The pale moon rides high over the steaming jungle, and the hyena calls on the hill. The Bunora will feed the moon tonight . . . the Bunora warriors will wash their spears in a white *b'wana's* blood!**

BUCK BENSON raised his rifle, squinting through the peep-sight to where the branch could be seen, jutting over the trail.

From the tree, long green and slimy moss trailers hung down to the ground. In the clear circle of the peep-sight, its emerald eyes glittering, the magnificent

profile of a leopard grew; filled the sight. His knuckle whitened as his finger caressed the trigger.

Now!

A twig cracked. He heard soft footsteps behind him. The small hairs on the back of his neck stiffened. Slowly, pulling his eyes away from the quarry, he turned.

"I hope," Laura Sten said crisply, "that you aren't going to shoot that leopard. It's mine, you know! And—*quite tame!*"

Benson lowered the gun. Sweat had broken out on his brow, under the pith helmet. There was a slight rustle. And when he looked again the great cat was gone!

Then he turned his eyes to the girl. She was in her early twenties, small and perfectly proportioned, with red hair gleaming beneath her *topee,* dressed in white silk blouse and English riding breeches.

Suddenly the great cat appeared, slinking out of the camouflaging jungle like a ghost, prowled around the girl and rubbed against her with deep rumblings of pleasure.

"I've seen cats every way," the famous New Yorker grinned. "But this is the first time I ever met 'em tame in the heart of the jungle. What is he—your pet house-cat or a decoy?"

"Could be both, Mr. Buck Benson!" she answered, and smiled at his astonishment. "Oh, yes, we know all about you here. The drums talk, you know. The African telegraph doesn't miss much. Dad and I live half a mile from your camp. I think you've met him."

"Oh, yes, Miss Sten," Buck said, a vague frown touching his lean, jungle-hard face. "Yes, I was sorry not to be able to use your father. You see—I—!"

HE stopped, remembering the shuffling trembling man who had come begging a job, his whole aspect that of a drunkard. But, as if she hadn't heard him the amazing girl said calmly: "Good job you didn't shoot Zara! If you'd killed him I might have been tempted to do the same to you," and she caressed the spotted terror easily.

"I'm glad I didn't, too!" Benson said quickly. "Besides, I can use the cat—and you, too, if you're willing. Come along to the camp with me and meet Ellerby—Grant Ellerby—my partner. A big publisher from New York who's out here for his health!"

She smiled. "If he sees Zara he'll die right away. You'd use my leopard as a decoy, I suppose? And where would I fit in?"

"As my assistant," Benson said shortly, dropping his gun into the crook of his arm. They struck through the overhung path where the interlaced monkey-ropes and vines turned the deep jungle to a sea-green color, until they emerged from the thick undergrowth into the camp clearing.

On the short journey Laura told Benson how she'd been born and brought up in a circus that toured Africa and the colonies. The circus had fallen on evil days. And rather than face the thought of parting with Zara or seeing the great beast destroyed, she had come back to the edge of the jungle.

"He gets plenty to eat here," she said, looking up at Buck's six-foot figure, wide-shouldered and slim-hipped, "And he's as wise as a college full of Oxford dons!"

In the wide clearing where camp had been pitched stood a double hut and two tents, huddled together from the menace of the jungle. The porters and boys had made themselves comfortable under the great roots of the wild-fig trees.

"Where's that cat?" Benson asked.

"Following," Laura answered casually. "Don't worry about Zara!" She sniffed. "Is that bacon and eggs?" And when he nodded she ran past the grinning figure of Ali Ben Said, as he beat loudly on a sheet of tin.

"Jambo, b'wana!" the Abyssinian gunboy yelled.

"Jambo!" Benson answered, swerving to throw his gun. Ali caught it expertly and gazed after them happily.

As they entered the hut a thin, sparsely built man, tired lines etching his face, unfolded himself from a rattan chair and stood looking at Laura.

"Miss Laura Sten," Buck said, "This is my friend and co-worker—Grant Ellerby!"

"How do you—!"

Bang!

The sudden shot shattered Ellerby's polite smile. From outside came a shriek of fear, a sudden scurrying rush and a coughing roar of anger. Zara, his tail lashing angrily, stood in the doorway, his ruff bristling, murder gleaming in his eyes.

"Zara!"

Laura Sten's voice rang with command. The giant beast, whose yellow eyes had passed Laura and Benson to fasten with a glassy glare on Ellerby's shrinking figure, blinked lazily, coughed with the bark of an anti-aircraft gun and sank down, spreading its tawny spotted body on the ground. It laid its head on its paws and closed its eyes.

"GOOD heavens!" Ellerby muttered, weakly, searching for the chair. From the doorway the face of Ali Ben Said, his eyes rolling in his dusky head, stared in disbelief at the great jungle cat.

"B'wana!" he said, tremblingly. "He knock de gun f'm my hand! I couldn't help it—he look for eat me sure!"

"Good Lord, Buck!" Ellerby breathed, his face as white as a sheet. "I never had such a fright in my life. . . ."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Ellerby," Laura said, easing him into a chair. "It's all my fault, really. I'm so used to Zara toddling along beside me that I seldom think of the effect he'll have on others. I should have warned you."

"Should have *warned* me!" Ellerby laughed shakily. "You should have warned that beast. He looks as if he'd enjoy nothing better than making a meal of me. Is he tame?"

She nodded and after a stiff whisky and soda Ellerby recovered enough to sit down to his food. Even Ali Ben Said got up nerve enough to feed the big cat some strips of raw bacon.

"We'll use the leopard as a decoy, Grant," Benson said enthusiastically, as the atmosphere calmed. "In a little while you'll be handling babies like that—" he nodded toward the bored leopard "—as easily as you'd handle a puppy!"

"It's a fool way to cure a man of nerves, I'd say," Grant grumbled good naturedly.

"I found him stretched out in his office chair like a rag doll," Benson told Laura. "So I figured as long as he's decent enough to publish my lousy books he might as well come out here for six months and sample some real adventure. It will buck up his health, too."

"So the first thing you do is to spring a leopard on me," Ellerby grinned. "Well, some day I'll get back at you."

THE ensuing weeks found Laura and Benson breaking trail in the jungle, cutting and laying deadfalls and traps for the wily denizens of the deep grasses and the high trees. The bag grew quickly as Zara led leopards and other cats into the traps, while hordes of inquisitive and shrill-voiced monkeys screeched and screamed in the branches.

The jungle swarmed with game. As if spattered by the gigantic brush of a giant artist, the tight green foliage glowed with the colorful plumage of parrakeets and rainbow-hued birds and even in the undergrowth, deadly as sin but beautiful as a jeweled necklace, cobras and ringhals lay in wait while pythons draped their shimmering length from the lower branches.

The veldt beasts were scarce but the rhinos and hippos, baboons and a myriad other monkeys, crocodiles and water-buffalo were thick in the deep forest. Like tiny ghosts, the pigmy natives appeared and disappeared again as if a hot breath had dissolved them.

Both Laura and Buck, chaperoned by their grinning gun-boy, Ali Ben Said, were in the habit of camping on *safari,* only returning when the bag was full and by its presence indicated that the time was ripe for skinning or other taxidermy. And while they were away Ellerby saw more and more of that shuffling, strange-eyed man, George Sten.

There is something about loneliness that will make a man believe what he wants to believe. So, on these occasions, by dint of expert conversation, Sten soon wormed out of Ellerby his interest in the famous ruins of Great Zandella. And with that information Sten began to plan.

One day, puffing at the cigar Ellerby had given him, he asked: "Why don't you help me, Ellerby? I can put you on to a good thing. F'rinstance!" and he held out a gold bangle in his fingers and gazed shrewdly at the publisher. "What's that?"

"Looks like ancient Egyptian," Ellerby said, with a judicious frown. "It's cer-

tainly antique enough. Where'd you get it?"

"In a cave this side o' Zandella ruins," Sten said, his small eyes glinting. "Oh, I know what you're goin' to say. You're goin' to say 'there ain't no treasure in Zandella.' But who said that? Professors from Capetown. Artists, archeologist blokes who go about diggin' up mummies and what-not!"

"You mean—?" Ellerby indicated the bangle. "You actually found this—near Zandella?"

Sten nodded, his lips twisting.

"I always heard they were supposed to be the gold smelting works of King Solomon?"

Sten grinned slyly. "I guess they supposed right, whoever did the supposin'?" he grinned and held up the ancient bauble. "See, I've picked up gold beads there, under the dirt, right in the hollow walls of Zandella myself. There's lumps o' Persian pottery and Chinese porcelain there.

"These natives ain't been here for ever. Before the Bonura took that territory there were other natives there. And before them—nobody knows. There ain't no records, nowhere. Nuthin' at all. Yet it stands to reason no race o' people would build walls twenty feet thick and forty feet high unless they had something to protect."

"And you think it was gold?" Ellerby asked, his native caution swept aside before the glittering prospect.

"I'm sure of it!" Sten snapped, his ratty eyes shining redly. "Gimme some money for this and I'll get the gear. And then we'll go up there to Zandella and get the rest o' it. It's treasure, real treasure, Ellerby. But we got to be careful. We got to watch what we're doin' 'cause Zandella's a Government monument. And what we find the Government will want to take!"

In every age the lust for gold has made men madmen, robbed them of caution, turned them into killers and robbers. It was with trembling fingers that Ellerby drew a bill from his wallet and handed it to Sten. He did not mention the matter to Benson or Laura when they came back and, after a few days' rest, prepared for a new *safari*. But had he been able to listen to Laura and her father, as she upbraided the sodden man for his dealings with the publisher he might have been less sure.

"One crack out o' you!" Sten growled at the girl. "And I'll whip you like I whip these 'cats.' Ellerby's a fool. He's got plenty of money. If he wants to believe there's gold in Zandella I'll not be the one to stop him. Nor will you, my lass!"

SOME days later Benson and Laura made camp on the edge of a melancholy lake almost hidden by deep growth, festooned with an incredible curtain of monkey-rope and vines. The tree-like bodies of crocodiles, their ugly snouts breaking water, could be seen in the pool. Far away, on the opposite side of the lake, where the sun beat down on grey rocks, hundreds of the loathsome reptiles dozed in the heat.

Everywhere the hideous ear-splitting din of thousands of monkeys and the screeching curses of a myriad brilliant parrakeets sounded raucously. This was the voice of the jungle, occasionally undercut by the sudden barking cough of a leopard or the shrill trumpeting of a crashing elephant. Grotesque and hideous maribou and adjutant storks, their baleful faces repellent and horrible, stalked about while a red lance struck across the lake and drumming wings announced the flight of scarlet flamingoes.

In their mosquito-proofed tents Laura and Buck slept through the blazing African noonday, the sky a yellow-white bowl of fire, while all around them the steaming heat of the jungle, rose in soft veils.

Zara lay beside his mistress's tent, a sleepy spotted cat with eyes mere slits as the day droned on. Suddenly, every hair erect, spitting and snarling, the jungle terror leaped to its feet, its coughing bark waking the sleepers and with a lightning stroke of its paw clawed at a swaying rope-like thing on the ground, backing, striking angrily, a slim tongue darting.

Buck threw the covering aside, grasped his rifle and fired as the cobra puffed itself for the strike. Blasted apart, a bloody stump waving horribly, it writhed and twisted on the grass. Zara leapt for it and tore it to pieces.

"Are you all right, Laura?" Buck shouted, running to where she had crawled from the tent at Zara's bellow of rage. Her face was white beneath the light tan.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the shattered snake. Then she was in his arms, he could hear the pounding of her heart.

"I—I—saw it!" she gasped. "My—rifle was too far away to reach. Once—a long time ago—I was closer than that—I've been frightened of cobras ever since!" She smiled, her lip trembling. "Silly of me, isn't it—an animal trainer—scared of snakes!"

"As long as *you're* safe, that's all that matters," Buck said. He found himself tightening his arms around her despite the presence of the boys. "It's so easy to die, here—so easy to sleep—and wake up with something like that, staring you in the face. I'm glad I was here—but I'm thankful Zara gave us warning!"

He thought of the dangers this slim girl faced beside him. Terror of hidden death by day and night. The menace of gorillas and elephant and the terrible searching avenging buffalo. Lions on the veldt and leopards in the jungle. Stings and fevers. The anger of wild pigs. Anything could happen. And—he realized it with a shock—he loved her!

Looking down into her eyes he saw that she, too, loved him. Zara rubbed against her, cat-eyes suspicious, but this was one time Laura paid no heed. And then they looked up to behold the gorgeous arrival of N'wanna, paramount chief of the Malogani, who now appeared with his state umbrella-bearer.

They welcomed the obese but jolly chief whose eyes shone with simple delight at the prospect of unlimited bully-beef sandwiches, bars of milk chocolate and chewing gum. He brought news of his tribe.

WHERE the jungle had crept around and above the scattered ruins of Great Zandella, where at night, they said, the ghosts of the long-dead priests of Isis roamed the hollow walls and moaned in the darkened alleys of uncemented bricks, deep shadows cast themselves in the elliptical buildings and palm fronds waved from the conical towers that pierced the sky.

Here, where Man's work had been strangled by the creeping green fingers of the encroaching forest, the useless hulks of stone gleamed darkly, hiding their age-old secrets. Nearby, almost concealed by thick undergrowth and heavy trailing moss and monkey-ropes the deep caves in which some departed race had lived, yawned cavernously.

And in one of these, after a tiring journey along paths cut with *machete* through ten-foot high jungle grass, Grant Ellerby stood, staring in horror at the drunken figure of George Sten. A strange, horrible change had come over Sten. He seemed to have lost all control of himself. His eyes held a wild, feverish glare. This must be how a madman looks, Ellerby thought with a lost feeling.

"I told her," Sten jeered. "I told her I'd fix ye! She accused me—ha, ha, ha! Very upset she was when she heard about the bangle. But I said I'd fix ye—and so I will!"

"Why did you trick me?" Ellerby said, trying to keep his voice calm and reasonable. "What for, man? You promised we'd have treasure here—and now. . . ."

"There is treasure here, Ellerby!" Sten said wildly. "*Your* treasure? You've got it in that wallet and I want it!" Stark madness gleamed from his piggy eyes, red-rimmed and shifty, but the revolver in his hand was steady.

"I waited until—today—I waited for weeks. Why? Not so's you could get the treasure. No! But so's *I* could get it! Hand over your wallet. Come on, now, don't try anything funny. Hand it over!"

Ellerby tossed him his well-filled wallet. Sten stuffed it in his pocket. "Turn around!" The voice came to Ellerby with a new note, a note of mad triumph, of savage cunning.

"I'm leavin' you here, Ellerby!" Sten said shrilly. "I'm leavin' you here so's a few friends of mine—the Bunora—can find you. Their customs should be very interesting to a man who publishes books. You'll never be able to publish this experience though, for you'll be the custom!"

The New Yorker stood, immobile. Something in Sten's voice carried a threat of unspeakable foulness.

"The Bunora believe that when the moon wanes, it is dying!" Sten husked. "They think it needs food. So they give it food. They take a man—or a woman—and they 'wash their spears' in his blood, Ellerby!

"They're all het up, Ellerby. 'Cause they *know* they've got a nice sacrifice—waitin' for them—waitin' right here! They'll come tonight. About eleven o'clock. The moon will be high then, will be hungry! And I hate to tel lyou, Ellerby, what they'll do to you before they kill you!"

Ellerby couldn't help letting out a scared groan. The horror of the plan struck him like a blow.

"No one saw you join me on the trail," Sten said softly now. "You just walked out of the camp—into this. But I'll be home sooner than we got here. I'll go to the camp to ask for you.

"I'll be very sorry you're not home. Very sorry. . . ."

"You're mad, Sten!" Ellerby shouted at last, terror riding him. But the sneering, taunting voice went on as if he had never spoken.

"They have funny customs, Ellerby. The men will eat your heart. The women are very playful with helpless white men. You'll be glad to die, Ellerby. You'll pray for death! When you're lying on that stone slab they say it's the ancient sacrificial altar of Great Zandella—you'll see the waning moon above you—and your life will be waning, too! But—slowly—slowly!"

Something hard descended on Ellerby's head. Stars filled his eyes. He pitched forward, lying on his face. Quickly Sten knelt beside him, tying his hands and feet. In the darkness of the cave his eyes glittered with the unhinged glare of a madman.

"Yes," he muttered to himself. "You'll get your treasure all right, Mr. Ellerby. In Heaven or Hell, wherever you're going!"

And many miles away, in their camp, Benson and Laura merrily entertained Chief N'wanna while he told them the news.

THE crops would be good, said the chief. The cattle were well. There were ten children born. Many of the women sent love-tokens to the men on safari. He had found a new well. The witch-doctor had made big magic. There would be many leopards taken. Two boys had been taken by a crocodile.

He stuffed a handful of bully-beef into his mouth.

"The Bunora will feed the moon," he added slowly. His eyes did not meet those of Laura. She knew the custom. It was held as secretly as possible. But she knew it. This, too, was known to him.

"Will the moon be fed well?" she asked lightly, hiding a feeling of dread.

"She will be well fed," N'wanna answered. His hands were filled with nut-chocolate. He bit off a piece and crunched it in his powerful teeth. "It is a white man—a *b'wana!*"

Laura was instantly alert.

"The Chief," she said casually, "grows old! It is a long age since a *b'wana* was fed to the moon. The Malogani know this. The Bunora know this. The white man—is he taken yet?"

"Not yet!" he said, still avoiding her eyes. "The women talk. The bucks swagger. Those who are not yet warriors say they will wash their spears in blood soon!"

"The *b'wana* is not taken?" she asked quietly. Suddenly she grew angry. "The Chief should give his wives away. He should go to the Cliff of Death and walk over. He is old—or he talks like a snake!"

"The Bunora," he mumbled, make great magic. The Chief speaks the truth."

Star-bright in her head a thought struck her. She turned to the chief. "Has the Chief seen my father?" she asked.

"The Malogani hunt," he answered obliquely. "They hunt near the Bunora. It is said that *B'wana* Sten has been seen with the Bunora. He gave presents. There was much palaver!"

She screamed. Buck was at her side in a jump. Zara leaped up, bristling. The natives drew away from her. But Chief N'wanna sat still. His mind seemed to be occupied with the contents of a can of condensed milk. His features were placid.

"Buck!" she clung to him. "Buck—we must go back—*now!* Don't wait. Don't ask questions! Make ready—hurry, dear! It's a matter of life and death! Please do as I ask—quickly!"

He whirled, barking orders. The tents were down in a flash. The fire was doused. The chief, carrying what he could to eat on the way, went with them. In an incredibly short time they were returning on their trail until, reaching the fork in the

path, they struck out for the kraal of the Malogani.

As they pushed on she spoke rapidly, bluntly.

"I should have told you before," she said to the grim-faced Benson, "George Sten isn't my father. I was born in the circus when it stopped near Kidala, for new specimens. My mother and father were both stricken by malaria and died. Sten adopted me.

"At one time he was the greatest 'cat' trainer in the business. But he drank. He got worse and worse. He used to beat me. He killed his animals with brutality. I had to save Zara from him, and the cat hates him yet.

"He's been squeezing your friend, Mr. Ellerby, for money. He had a very old Egyptian bracelet which he'd stolen years ago. He's been pretending to Mr. Ellerby that there's more of them in Great Zandella—!"

A light of understanding flashed in Benson's puckered eyes. "You think your father—Sten, I mean, is—going to betray Grant to them? My God!"

"That's why we must hurry!" she said.

Darkness was on the trail. Moonlight filtered through the festooning trellis of the moss-green tendrils. Dark shapes seemed to skulk in the tall grass. The beaters moved ahead. Gun-boys held their rifles at the ready.

AROUND them the myriad sounds of the jungle opened up. Far away the call of a leopardess made Zara hesitate, his spotted body still and quiet. Suddenly from his throat an answering cry belled. Lately Zara had shown increasing tendencies to go off into the jungle alone. He had come back with reluctance, casting his green eyes backward. On these occasions the cries of the females had been borne to Laura. She felt that the sensitive animal, knowing she had found someone to protect her, heeded her no more. The call of the wild was growing stronger and stronger.

"Come, Zara!" Laura commanded. But the great brute stood, statuesquely magnificent, his head thrown up, sniffing the scent of the female downwind. She had to tug at him to make him move. Slowly, turning again and again to sniff the air, he trotted by her side.

They reached the *kraal* of the Malogani, arousing the rest of the men, dumping their equipment. War spears appeared. Knobkerries swung loosely. Feathers bloomed on kinky heads. Benson, without wasting any time, led the war party into the jungle.

It began to rain. Softly. Slowly. Gaining a steady, thrumming force. There was no lightning. No thunder. But the rain stormed. It began to bounce off the oily bodies, gleaming on the ebon shoulders. It was warm rain. They marched in single file, weaving through the tall grass, only the steel tips of the *assegais* showing above the growth.

"I've been praying, Buck," Laura said. She gripped her rifle in her capable hands. "I've been praying we'll be in time!"

THE witch-doctor of the Bunora raised the slim keen knife to his lips and kissed the cold blade. With both arms upraised he showed the knife to the moon, sailing through the rain-washed sky almost directly overhead.

His hideous mask, the rattle of dried crocodile's feet and monkey skulls, human hair waving from the wrist-bands on his slim, strong hands—the strange unintelligible incantations which poured from his fanatic lips—Grant Ellerby stared up in horror, seeing him a devil incarnate—watching the knife as it caught the silver gleam of the moonlight, poised high above his heart.

Bound by thin, hard leather thongs which bit into his flesh, he lay naked on the altar in the center of the ruins of Great Zandella. When the moonlight struck a certain point on that stone, he would die!

In the shadows cast by the ruins a mass of bodies stood tensely, almost invisible against the darkness. Young bucks waited for the signal. In a few seconds their spears would taste the white-man's blood. Soon, they would eat his heart. They would be warriors. The walls of Zandella are hollow. Many of them are twenty feet thick. Most of them are in ruins but some still retain their original state, made of matched stones, un-mortared.

From the outside it is possible to obtain entrance through the broken walls, to walk in their sable depths until, directly opposite, the Altar of Blood can be seen.

The witch-doctor, his eyes closed in a

paroxysm of religious fervor, muttered and mumbled, his head thrown back. As he opened his eyes the moonlight flooded the designated spot. The knife flashed!

Two spouts of yellow flame licked out. A double roar of rifles echoed among the walls. With two blue holes in his forehead, his eyes shut tight, the witch-doctor fell across Ellerby, blood gushing and pouring over the shrieking victim.

Black figures, like great apes, clambered on the walls. Silver leaves of death, *assegais* thrown unerringly at the almost-hidden warriors of the Bunora, fell in a deadly shower. Shouts and yells rose in a mighty volume. Through it all the crashing sound of rifle-fire echoed back from the ancient bricks.

From the men in the shadow shrieks of rage rose and their arms flashed. The air was filled with assegais. A yelling horde of Malogani flowed against the startled Bunora, knobkerries whirling, shields rattling, short stabbing-spears flicking like the silver tongues of invisible snakes. Dying moans resounded in the once-holy edifice.

Kneeling beside the altar, his rifle growing hot in his hands, Benson sent a steady stream of bullets into the wild tribesmen, while Laura cut Ellerby's bonds and dragged him from beneath the grisly burden of the hideously decorated priest.

It was soon over. Surprised, and unable to maneuver, the Bunora were routed, sent screaming in terror from the blast of the guns and the hissing death of assegais.

Ellerby gasped and regained his senses. A Malogani had thrown a native blanket of tree-bark over him. With the return of consciousness came a return of horror. He shuddered, looking at Benson and Laura gratefully, unable to speak.

With a shot of whisky and some food inside him, he recovered enough to tell them what had happened. Laura cried as he described Sten's mad plan, his sadistic joy.

"We must get him, Buck!" she said suddenly, wiping her tears. "We must get him —put him in prison—where he can't harm anyone else! I'll go ahead with Zara!"

"No!" he said. Since the news brought by Chief N'wanna his face had grown hard as iron. He put his hand on her arm.

"We'll stay here for the night," he said crisply. "Ellerby's too shocked and weak to come with us and I won't leave him. No, Laura, we'll stay here for the night. The Malogani will send our gear on to camp."

ALTHOUGH she felt vaguely uncomfortable, Laura agreed. With a good fire blazing they made themselves a meal. The publisher still looked terror-stricken, his eyes darting about the cave.

"You can thank Laura for being alive, old man!" Buck said, his arm around his friend's shoulder. "She seemed to sense what Chief N'wanna didn't say."

"I do thank her," Ellerby said gratefully. He rose, a grotesque figure in the native blanket, and began to stride nervously up and down the cave. "That black devil! Well, I want to forget about it."

He paused, gesturing to the back of the cave.

"It was here," he said. "It was right here that Sten said there was treasure."

Pointing a shaking finger at the wall he stopped suddenly and stared.

"It's falling!" he shouted, springing back in alarm. "The wall's been softened—it's falling out!"

Weakened by centuries of rain and storms, and its base unsupported for many years, the wall had given way at last. It thundered forward into the cave.

And, gleaming amid the ruins, shining before their astonished eyes, was something that glittered. Something smooth and yellow! *"Gold!"* they breathed, fascinated by the sight of holy vessels, bowls of hammered gold, priceless bracelets, bangles and wristbands of pure African gold, chains of glittering links, buried by the priests of Isis and Osiris centuries ago, hidden from the eyes of men and the greedy hands of men . . . while the world grew old.

"George Sten couldn't have known," Laura said, lifting a heavy gold bracelet. "He'd never have robbed and tried to kill you if he had, Mr. Ellerby."

Ellerby blinked his eyes.

"No, I don't think he could have even imagined it," he admitted. Then, through the pain and astonishment of the night he grinned wryly. "We'll have to hand these over to the Government, you know. Yes, Sten told me of that, too! But we'll all be rewarded, even though we can't take this treasure away with us for keeps."

"As far as I'm concerned," Buck said, pulling Laura into his arms and smiling

over her shoulder to his friend, "The Government can have all of it. Every bauble. The only kind of treasure I'm concerned in is real jungle treasure — like Laura."

"I'll give you my share as a wedding-present," Ellerby said. He grinned suddenly. "As a wedding-present and thank-offering combined! By the way, Laura, where's your household pet? Where's Zara?"

She looked around guiltily. But Zara was gone!

THE ground dried quickly when the rain stopped. The baked earth steamed in the night. And Zara, homeward bound, slipped from one shadow to another.

Far ahead, its window a golden lozenge in the night, George Sten sat in his hut, drink-sodden but wakeful. He could not sleep. His thoughts kept reverting to the Bunora and what they must be doing to Ellerby.

He had cut back and gone to the camp, pretending no knowledge of Ellerby. There, non-committally, Kayanu the cook said he knew nothing of *b'wana* Ellerby. He had gone. The others would be gone two days.

"Kiva heri, Kayanu!" he had said, knowing the cook would remember.

"Kiva heri, b'wana!" Kayanu answered, bidding him goodbye.

So he had gone back to the hut. Taking Ellerby's wallet from his pocket, he spread the bills out on the table. Big bills. Hundreds—one for a thousand! Yes, he decided it was worth it. And there would be no trouble. Ellerby was dead, without a doubt!

He stepped to the door, looking up at the moon high in the cloud-free sky. Something moved softly in the shadows, a darker spot in the darkness. He shuddered, peering into the night, his lips twitching.

"You fool!" he muttered. "There's nothing there. Nothing at all! It's—it's—imagination. That's all—imagination!"

He turned to go back into the house.

The shadow detached itself. The spot of greater darkness rose, blackly silhouetted against the pearl-glow of the night. In a great arc, his terrible claws extended, Zara leaped with the speed of an express train —roaring his demoniac bellow of death.

Sten's body jerked. In the split second before the great cat struck him, he tried to flee. But the flying battering-ram smashed squarely between his shoulders. There was a frightful, ear-splitting scream of mingled pain and terror . . . a rumbling roar from the tawny beast . . . and then something tore and rended with throaty growls.

A pitiful whimper echoed . . . a mewling wail lingered on the hot air, died away. There was silence for a space . . . then a gurgling rattle . . . and silence again!

The giant cat pawed at the thing, holding it in its claws, tearing it gently, softly. There was a sound of something dragging, leaving a dark trail. The door stood open, a yellow oblong in the darkness. Tall grass rustled as a heavy weight dragged . . . dragged slowly. . . .

IN the morning Buck and Laura came to the hut. They stood still, loaded with gold, looking at what had been a dark trail last night and now was a rusty red!

It led to the open door. The lamp had guttered, filling the room with sooty specks. On the table a half-empty whisky bottle stood, and beside it lay Ellerby's wallet—the notes spread out enticingly.

There was nothing of George Sten at all. Nothing but the pool at the door—the dark red trail leading to the jungle—where Zara, answering the call of his kind, had gone forever!

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A Novelet of the Black Congo

THE LION KING

By ARMAND BRIGAUD

Like a faint, far bull-elephant's trumpeting came the desperate call—"Rally to Je-an! Death stalks the White Giant. For Omdurrah The Slaver, at the head of his dog-toothed legion, has baited a magic man-snare, using Je-an's sworn blood-brother."

SERGEANT HAALS pointed at the bales of merchandise which he had just inspected and shouted:

"*Allons,* you black porters! Tie up your loads!" Then, turning to Lieutenant Rosen, who stood in the doorway of his little log-house, he announced:

"I didn't find firearms or forbidden ar-

ticles. Just red calico, gimcracks, and shiny copper wire, to be made into necklaces and bracelets for the fashionable negresses of the jungle."

"Who's the caravan master?" Rosen retorted.

A heavy, brutal-appearing half-breed lumbered onward—a mountain of a man, more than six feet tall and as wide as a full-grown gorilla.

"My name is Omdurrah, and I'm your servant," he rumbled. "I ask to sleep in the security of your *boma*. I ask also permission to sell my wares in your district."

"You'll get the necessary written authorization, but I don't guarantee your safety," Rosen replied. "I established this *boma*—this fortified camp—only a few weeks ago. I'm not well acquainted, as yet, with the neighboring tribesmen."

"Joseph, please!" a gentle voice interrupted.

Rosen stepped into the house, closed the door at his shoulders.

"Anne," he said with affected gravity, "you shouldn't interfere with my official business."

The eyes of the American-born Madame Rosen were clouded with worry.

"That wild merchant gives me the shivers," she said apprehensively. "Beware of him, Joseph!"

Straight like a rod, wiry and radiating confidence, Rosen took his young wife into his arms.

"My dear," he smiled, "do you know what's the trouble with your pretty head? Too much imagination and a flair for the dramatic! But the fault is all mine. I should have never allowed you to come with me in this forlorn part of Africa."

"I'm not afraid for myself, but for our little Jean," Madame Rosen replied, checking the tears that were filling her eyes. "I have a terrible foreboding . . . and . . . have you looked well at that Omdurrah?"

Through the curtains of the room's single window, Rosen could see the courtyard.

Omdurrah stood in its very middle, enveloped by the shimmering eddies of heat haze. His enormous arms hung limply at his sides, his great woolly head was bowed. Black flies ran all over his pock-marked face, stuck into the corners of his eyes, and he didn't even bother to chase them away.

"Calm yourself, Anne," Rosen said, "that mammoth piece of ebony tripe is too sluggish to be dangerous."

WHEN the hour of the evening meal came, the black infantrymen of the garrison regaled Omdurrah and his porters with plenty of boiled meat and maize bread. The caravan-men ate their fill, and chewed sticks of tobacco for dessert. As soon as the bugle sounded taps, they stretched themselves on the bare ground of the courtyard.

Sergeant Haals thought that they were sleeping when he made his last round of inspection. But, toward midnight, Omdurrah and six of his men flattened themselves on their bellies and, keeping in the shade of the stockade, crawled toward the gates. The other six porters pulled slings and stones as big as oranges out of their loin cloths.

The stones hurtled through the air and fractured the skull of the lookout on the watch tower in the very moment when Omdurrah and his companions pounced on the soldiers on guard at the gates and finished them with furious dagger strokes before they could raise an outcry.

A HALF hour later, swarms of black warriors emerged as silently as shadows out of bushes and ravines, charged through the open gates, invaded the dormitories and butchered the white non-coms and the black infantrymen of the garrison in their sleep.

Two soldiers escaped that rapid massacre—the orderly Baroundo and his brother Basoke who having been secretly warned to do so by Madame Rosen slept fully clothed in the hall of the little log house to protect their masters from a possible attack of the caravan men.

The impact of axes and war clubs on the barred door awakened Baroundo and Basoke, who sprang on their feet and seized their rifles.

"I'll shoot down the first accursed one who enters. Go to warn the lieutenant, brother," Basoke growled.

Baroundo turned about, ran into the main room and collided with his wife Debela, who stammered:

"*Nwah!* What's this noise?"

In that very instant the door was broken

down. Basoke fired. A hail of javelins flew into the house. Most of them thudded and stuck into the wooden floors, but two of the slender spears found their mark in the body of Debela, who collapsed in her husband's arms.

Then Baroundo heard Madame Rosen pleading:

"We shall never be able to get out of here, my husband and I. But, you are a black man, like our aggressors, and you may manage to get away. Save your little master, Jean, Baroundo, and my soul shall be forever grateful to you."

Debela's heart had ceased beating. The screams of the dying Basoke filled the house. Then Baroundo saw Lieutenant Rosen, with a revolver in each hand, and Madame Rosen at his side. Almost instantly, the unfortunate white woman fell, with her skull split open by a thrown ax. Her husband's guns blazed at top speed.

Sobbing, Baroundo laid Debela's body on the floor, and hurried to execute the last order of his mistress.

IN the tiny cubicle of the child's room, Baroundo said:

"Little master, I must carry you away, wrapped in a blanket, and you must not cry or call out. Monsieur le Lieutenant, and Madame, your mother, will follow us later, with all the other soldiers."

The six-year-old Jean Rosen had implicit faith in the orderly, who had always been his servant. Also he was too terrified by the din raised by the invading savages to raise any questions. He did not protest when Baroundo wrapped and tied him in a dark blanket.

That done, the orderly cast off his clothes; then he picked up the bundled child with one hand, and his gun and ammunition belt with the other, and jumped out of the rear window of the little log house.

On his way to the gate, he saw an ammunition case, which had probably been discarded, on account of its weight, by the savage who had pilfered it. Baroundo, who was a very strong man, lifted the case and tucked it under his right arm.

The tribesmen who looked at his naked black body and unhurried motions in the dim radiance of the night, thought that he was the servant-warrior of some headman, who had been ordered by his master to carry away a load of pillaged clothes. But Baroundo didn't breathe freely until the dark wall of tangled vegetation of the jungle loomed right before him.

DURING the remainder of the night and the following morning, Baroundo's big, sprawling feet splashed in the water of shallow streams and padded over the hard surface of rocky trails. Not once did he tread on soft ground.

Late in the afternoon, he reflected that he had put a safe distance between the savage horde of Omdurrah. Having left no tracks, he had no fear of pursuit.

At a water-hole, Baroundo killed a wild pig with a well-aimed shot and, helped by Jean, built a smokeless fire.

When they had gorged themselves with ill-cooked meat, the white child and the orderly stretched themselves on the damp grass. For the next few hours they slept heavily, drugged by exhaustion and by their labored digestion.

The sun was low on the western edge of the horizon when Jean awakened, fretting.

"Where are my father and mother? Why don't they come to meet us?"

That cry startled Baroundo, who came out of his slumber well rested and overwhelmed by the full realization of his misfortunes.

"Whaai! Ahiee!" he screamed, propping himself up in a sitting position and swaying back and forth. "They are dead, your good *maman* and the lieutenant, and so are Debela and Basoke, my brother. . . . *Ahiee,* little white man! Sorrow was our birthday gift. . . ."

Jean's mouth opened wide, but no sound issued from it. Heart-broken and frightened, he sat there, in the shade of a gnarled cram-cram tree, a pathetic little white child in the midst of a hostile African wilderness.

Meanwhile Baroundo's inborn savagery was breaking out of the veneer of civilization superimposed by his years of duty under the flag of civilization. Dribbles of foam spurted out of his thick lips as he rolled on the grass, tearing his breast with his blunt nails, and howling:

"Totem ghosts of my ancestors, avenge

me! Let me see Omdurrah torn to pieces while still alive. . . ."

Jean arose and went to seek a refuge among the roots of a towering euphorbia tree, at the opposite end of the clearing. No more did he recognize his servant and friend in the madman who was thrashing in the loam, uttering beastly cries. Only his fear of finding himself alone among the lurking dangers of the jungle restrained him from running away.

At length Baroundo got on his feet. Blood oozed out of the deep self-inflicted scratches on his face and breast. His eyes nearly popped out of their orbs as he stretched a muscular arm toward the terrorized child.

"O son of my slain master!" he roared, "last night, no beasts of prey jumped on us while we were escaping in the dark jungle. . . . It is the sign that the totem-ghosts want the heart and the lungs torn out of the slashed bodies of Omdurrah and his men, who killed your parents, my wife and my brother. . . .

"But we shall not go to the forts of the white men, my master! They would only send soldiers to hunt and shoot down or hang Omdurrah. . . . *Tchah!* death, without much pain, and the imprisonment of his foul dogs of followers would be punishment too puny!

"Instead, little white man! I shall keep you in the wilderness with me! I shall make you strong and crafty in the ways of the jungle and the bush! And, as soon as you grow to manhood, we shall destroy Omdurrah as cruelly as he destroyed our beloved ones. . . ."

A wind was arising. Its blasts, gushing through countless ravines and the festooned vegetation of the thickets, sounded like the moans of countless souls in hell. The scarlet glare of the sunset was spreading on the sky, and covering the jungle with a lurid scarlet film. In that sinister and savage setting, the frenzied figure of Baroundo didn't seem human any longer. Jean had a confused impression that a ferocious breath seeping out of the very African soil, some mysterious power too mighty and eerie for his childish mind to understand, was turning the deranged orderly into a bloodthirsty fiend.

Uttering a pitiful cry, the stranded child dived into a big hole of the ground and cowered there, while Baroundo's stentorian voice cursed and shouted defiance at the gathering darkness.

II

TEN years later, gray tufts matted Baroundo's kinky hair. His powerful muscles had become even suppler and stronger, because men living primitively under the burning African sun reach the peak of their physical power in their middle-age—unless disease and ill-healed wounds wear them out in their youth.

At sixteen years of age, Jean Rosen was as tall and sturdy as the former orderly.

The manner with which he had been raised would have killed a frail child. Every day, Baroundo had forced him to run for hours, and to climb the tallest trees. He had wrestled with him and trained him in the use of bow, spear and battle-ax. Finally, he had vigorously rubbed his body with toughening juices.

Jean, who was a healthy youngster with plenty of stamina, had benefited to the fullest from that treatment. But there were other factors which, apart from Baroundo's planning, had contributed to his exceptional development.

In Africa, habitual hunger is the rule. The rough agriculture of the women does not provide much, and tribal hunters seldom succeed in killing enough game for an entire village. As a result, children do not often develop properly. But, living in the African jungle or bush, it is not hard to bring down a small monkey, a wild pig, or, luck assisting, a plump antelope; and the flesh of each of these animals is more than enough to fill to capacity the stomachs of two greedy eaters.

Thus, there was plenty of vitamins, proteins and all the other body-building factors in the heaps of roasted meat, fruits, tender roots and birds' eggs that Jean ate daily. And his skin-perspiration was always at its best, because his white man's instinct prompted him to bathe often.

Like all village-raised negroes, Baroundo was an earthbound ground hunter. Jean, however, had decided from the very beginning of his life in the wilderness, to imitate the monkeys' manner of swinging from branch to branch, and from tree to tree.

Baroundo laughed at his first clumsy attempts. But the day came when he saw, with awed wonder, his white ward traveling by the aerial route faster than a ring-tailed rhaetus.

Jean Rosen was seventeen years old when a prolonged drought drove away or killed most of the grass-eating animals of his hunting grounds.

In the bush and on the arid plains, clouds of fine dirt rose to the sky. The lips of the hungry lions sagged, their pelts hung in peeling folds. Big, angular bones stuck out of their wasted shoulders and crops.

In the jungle, the streams turned into trickles of foul water, the marshes dried out. The leaves fell out of the trees and the festoons of parasitical growths became stinking and crumpling hawsers of rotting vegetation. For the first time in a quarter of a century, the burning beams of the sun filtered through the skeletal network of bare branches and reached the ground, which lost its moisture, crusted, and finally disintegrated into a sticky dust. The jungle's marauders, the leopards and the tiger cats, found it increasingly hard to make a kill and discarded their nocturnal habits. Snarling, they roamed at all hours of the day.

Thus it happened that, feeling the pinch of the famine, Baroundo and Jean decided to migrate, following the trails carved by the hoofs of the departed grass-eaters.

Two days later, thoroughly starved, they entered a region of sparse woods.

Baroundo thought that his luck was too great, and he couldn't trust his eyes when, suddenly, a herd of antelopes came out of a ravine and, seeing the two men, scattered with a burst of speed that would have outdistanced the fastest racing automobile.

Jean threw up his bow, drove a quick snap-shot and caught the last antelope in the middle of its leap with an arrow. Then he ran to the wounded beast and finished it with a quick thrust of his knife.

JEAN and Baroundo built a big fire between two boulders, made a spit out of a straight, well-peeled branch. Their mouths watered as they took turns in broiling the skinned and cleansed carcass of the antelope.

The smell of blood attracted a few jackals, who sat on their haunches at a safe distance, licking their chops. Vultures began to fly overhead. Suddenly, louder than the cawing of the scavengers of the sky, Jean heard the unmistakable sound of human screams.

"Watch our dinner," he ordered Baroundo and, picking up his bow and spear, he ran in the direction of the desperate calls for help.

A few minutes later he came in sight of an old rhinoceros' trap, an eight feet deep excavation, with straight sides offering no hold to the hands of a man or the claws of a beast.

Two live beings were caught in that snare, a bearded, pot-bellied pigmy and a leopard.

To all appearances, the leopard had been the first to be caught. Apparently, at the moment of its falling, he had entangled its hind quarters in the screen of saplings and heaped branches covering the trap, and sprained his back. On the contrary, the pigmy had suffered no injury and could move rapidly. With desperate leaps he had in so far managed to avoid by a hair's-breadth the fangs and the lashing fore paws of the spotted killer.

"Lucky for him that the leopard is crippled and unable to move fast. Even so, he couldn't last for long, without help," Jean muttered, and quickly shot two arrows into the back of the leopard. Then, grasping his spear close to the point, he thrust the butt into the eagerly clutching hands of the pigmy, and lifted him out of his prison.

Never before had Jean met a man of the little people. But, from Baroundo, he had learned plenty about their habits, inordinate pride and gluttony, and also a smattering of their crude language.

"How did it happen," he asked, repressing a smile, "that a mighty hunter like you fell into a snare?"

"A whole herd of giant buffaloes chased me so fast that I had to run without seeing," the pigmy lied, for a single mangy buffalo had been after him. "But, if I had not lost my quiver while falling, I would have killed the leopard without your help."

Waddling on his short, bow legs, the pigmy circled the mouth of excavation and eventually retrieved a quiver of stout hip-

popotamus' hide. The arrows in it were short and slender. But Jean glanced at them with deep respect. It was no secret to him that the little people smeared their arrow tips with a poison strong enough to kill an elephant.

"I'm Mbouro, great hunter, great warrior and chief of a tribe," the pigmy raved, beating on his chest. "Today I killed two bull giraffes, and I was after two more when the buffaloes suddenly came out of a ravine and attacked me. . . ."

"Why do you slay many giraffes? Have you many mouths to feed?" Jean interrupted.

"No," Mbouro smiled, uncovering a mess of broken teeth. "My people always find plenty of grubs, insects and small animals, and feast on them. But I dreamed that the knobs of four giraffes' heads would bring me luck, and I wanted to collect them as soon as possible."

That was the reason why a dwarf with a quiver full of poisoned darts had destroyed two of the largest and least offensive species of animals of Africa and planned to kill an additional two. Jean felt almost sorry that he had rescued Mbouro from his danger. Nevertheless he said:

"My companion is roasting an antelope. Come and eat with us."

"I will, because my belly is hungry," Mbouro gloated.

AN hour later his stomach was swollen like an oversized watermelon. Being unable to eat any more, because no meat remained on the antelope's bones, he began to chatter:

"You, white man who lives like a hunter of the forest and the jungle and you, black man who are with him, what are you doing in this territory, where the tribesmen are few and always in fear of the slavers?"

Jean's eyes gleamed. Baroundo scowled. Mbouro scratched himself with both hands, like a monkey, and chattered:

"Don't you know of this? This is the Uele country, which belongs to the white men called Belgians. East of it there is the Bahr el Ghazal, owned by the Englis. North of Uele are the wastelands of Mbumu, where the Franzes are masters.

"The slavers have a *boma* in a remote spot of the Bahr el Ghazal, another in the middle of a swamp of the Mbumu, and a third one, the largest, in a little known locality of this land of Uele. They seize tribesmen in Uele and Mbumu, and sell them on the slave marts of the Bahr el Ghazal. In Uele and in Mbumu they sell men captured in the Bahr el Ghazal. . . ."

"The white men rule above the tribes. Why don't they put an end to this slave traffic?" Baroundo growled.

Mbouro dug his hooked fingers under his armpits.

"The white men," he squealed, "Englis, Franzes and Belgians, they all live far, in magic-built towns, and what happens in this wilderness doesn't bother them.

"Once the Englis and the Franzes got angry . . . when the slavers took many, many women from Mbumu and sold them to some Arab merchants who were visiting the Bahr el Ghazal. But the slavers quickly sought refuge here, in Uele, and the Belgians, having no quarrel with them, didn't care to spend the gold and silver coins, which they prize so much, to make war for the sake of tribesmen belonging to the Englis and the Franzes.

"Tchah! That was what the slavers' supreme chief, Omdurrah, thought would happen. For Omdurrah, who is as wise as he's strong, powerful and evil, has often harmed men belonging to the Belgians, but so cleverly that the Belgians never got wind of it.

"The Belgians are still anxious, though, to find out what happened to a troop of their *askaris* which was sent to explore this territory many moons ago and disappeared without leaving any trace, just as if the very ground had swallowed them. The ruins of the *boma* that they had built were found, but that was all. . . ."

Jean's eyes clouded. Undoubtedly, the *boma* to which the pigmy alluded was the one where his parents had been murdered. He had only a hazy recollection of all the events leading to the surprise attack which had made an orphan and a jungle creature out of him, but the faces of his father and mother were indelibly printed in his memory. And so was the towering figure of Omdurrah, who had apparently succeeded in effacing all the traces of his crimes; because, for the last eleven years, not a day had passed without Baroundo

whispering in his ears lurid descriptions which convulsed him with rage and revengeful hatred against the chief murderer of Lieutenant Rosen and his wife.

Yet, the news that the power of Omdurrah had grown, and that his biggest fortified camp was comparatively near, were an unexpected shock for Jean. He had often heard Baroundo saying: "I took you out of Ueleland. Until the moment to strike comes, it would be dangerous to look for Omdurrah, or to ask about him. Our inquiries could be reported to him by a spy, and he would send men after us. But, what need is there of doing something of the sort, anyhow? No matter how old, the trails of fully grown cow elephants and thoroughly evil men are easily detected." However, Jean had not anticipated the discovery that Baroundo's sense of orientation had been faulty, and that for eleven years they had wandered in the territory where Omdurrah held sway, owing their freedom and perhaps their very life to the fact that their presence had escaped the attention of the powerful slaver and bandit chief.

"Tchah!" Mbouro concluded, "You offered me a feast. I invite you to another. I cut the flesh of the two giraffes around the spots where my poisoned arrows stuck. Let's go to skin the long-necks, and to eat some of their tender meat."

"By now the vulture must have torn your giraffes to shreds," Baroundo replied.

"No. Mbouro, the great hunter, knows what to do," the pigmy modestly replied, "I covered the carcasses of the giraffes with stones and plenty of packed sod."

A HALF hour later, on coming out of a small wood, Mbouro chuckled: "Look at that mound in the middle of the plain! My dead giraffes are buried under it . . . and three live ones stand near them!"

"There are also lions," Jean snapped.

Mbouro stared in the direction pointed out by the white youth's arm and clicked his tongue.

The lions, two of them, crawled with their snouts against the wind. They were big, dark-maned beasts, eager to kill.

Baroundo glanced at the giraffes and shook his head, whispering:

"The cow and the bull giraffe may get away; but the calf is surely doomed."

The lions soon reached a knoll which hid them from the giraffes' view. They couldn't see their quarries, but they knew from the scent carried by the wind that they were not far from them. With magnificent leaps, their long, tawny bodies soared above the crest of the knoll and catapulted toward the plain beyond.

Instantly the giraffes darted madly in the opposite direction, the young calf losing speed after a few lunges. A big bull giraffe, slogging alongside its young, jerked around the small head on top of its enormous neck, saw the lions coming as fast as streak of lightning. . . .

The bull giraffe made a curious jump and, for a moment, seemed to float above ground. Then it turned about like an immense spinning top. The next instant, the fastest lion sprang for the base of its towering neck.

The bull giraffe leaped aside. The lion clawed its left shoulder with two lashing forepaws and fell on all fours. Before it could rebound in a second leap, the razor-edged hooves into which ended the steely cylinders that were the giraffe's forelegs, hit its spine, smashed it and tore the entrails beneath.

The giraffe's hooves shone red when the second lion circled it at dazzling speed and pounced squarely on its back. The dust rose in whirling clouds around the two animals; then the giraffe made a strange motion, not unlike that of a rocking wooden horse, and ended by rearing. The lion slid off its crop.

Red furrows painted the giraffe's broad back; but, in that same instant, its terrible forehooves met the rising leap of the lion, broke it in midair, smashed the maned killer to the ground and struck at it, time and again, with a steady pistoning.

The second lion was still in the tall grass when the three giraffes leisurely ambled away.

"Baroundo," a sudden impulse prompted Jean to say, "I shall train giraffes to fight for me."

Baroundo's eyes nearly popped off their orbs. Then his head snapped back and he began to laugh at the top of his lungs. But his glee abruptly ceased when he noticed nervousness under Jean's carefree attitude. For the white boy didn't intend

to intrust his safety in Northern Uele territory to blind luck any longer.

In that moment, unexpectedly, Mbouro offered a solution for their problem:

"In the dark forests of Southern Uele, the poison arrows of the little people kill all enemies and insure the safety of all friends. Come with me, pitch your hut near mine, and my tribesmen will respect you as my saviors and brothers."

Jean heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief, smiled at Baroundo who, a wide grin on his face, was motioning to him to accept, and exclaimed:

"We shall gladly come with you, Mbouro."

III

THE hundred odd pigmies of Mbouro's tribe lived in a forest of towering trees, which shut off the beams of the sun. They were an undernourished lot of pot-bellied little men, with big heads and scrawny shoulders. They fed on grubs, berries and small game, and were scared out of their wits at the mere mention of crocodiles, snakes and leopards of the nearby jungles. They didn't dare at all to enter the open prairie dotted with bushes, where the big game abounded. Mbouro, who had challenged the dangers of the outside world, was considered a tribal hero and a super-chief by them.

This motley tribe of undersized savages were frightened by the arrival of Baroundo, for, since immemorial ages, the tall warriors of the negro tribes had attacked at every turn and mercilessly chased the little people. Jean's soft voice and ready smile, on the contrary, enthralled them. When they saw the kind of a fighter that he was, they followed him everywhere. Their name for him was—Lion King.

Thus the day came when Jean came out of the dark recesses of the forest, crossed the jungle at the head of some twenty pigmies, and finally reached with them a wide stretch of open bush country.

The sight that confronted the timorous little men who were with him, was typical of the African veldt.

Wind-twisted trees, with branches growing all on one side, threw slim shades over the muddy approaches to a water hole. The tall grass, with its yellow and pale-green stems bristling over the tan ground, was brittle under the scorching sun.

An old buffalo had collapsed and died on a bank, and swarms of vultures were tearing at its carcass, amidst a din of cawing and a great flapping of wings. But, unmindful of the passing of the fellow grass-eater, herds of antelopes, zebras and gnus were grazing all over the immense plain, surrounded by the clouds of fine dirt lifted by their hoofs. Silhouetted against the grey clay of a grassless slope, some thirty giraffes were plucking leaves out of the branches of a row of gum trees. Far in the distance, the tops of a chain of hills were baked blurs. And, above all, the sky shone like the blue-white flame of countless tons of melting steel.

Suddenly, then, quick as a streak of lightning, antelope, gnus and zebras burst into a wild flight. The ground shook and boomed under the rapid tattoo of thousands of pounding hoofs. Charged blindly by a group of galloping gnus, the vultures flew shrieking raucously toward the sky. Their deafness and poor sense of smell forbade the giraffes to hear or scent any danger. Nevertheless, alarmed by the stampede of the other animals, they froze in their tracks and, keeping their huge bodies as still as statues, stared in all directions.

But it was only when a hundred yards or so separated them from the gum trees, that the lions came out of the deep ruts of the ground which had enabled them to conceal their advance.

The giraffe herd consisted of fifteen cows, ten calves and five bulls. The cows and calves escaped, but the bulls stood their ground. Against them charged a dozen lions.

Five of them ganged on a big, reddish male giraffe, and brought it down almost at once. Three others had the same luck with another bull. But two lions were instantly crippled by the slashing hoofs and pistoning forelegs of the three remaining male giraffes, which galloped away.

The ten surviving lions didn't pursue them. The carcasses of two giraffes made up more than a meal for them, and instinct prompted them not to take unnecessary risks.

The three bulls who had escaped overtook the cows and six of the young ones.

But four calves became separated from the remainder of the herd, and sought a refuge in a sparse thicket.

Looking at them, Jean felt that luck had at last played in his hands. Shouting a command to the pigmies, he ran to his prizes. He didn't fear the lions, because he knew that the maned king of the bush hunts and slays only to appease its hunger.

Small the four giraffes were, but their forehoofs nearly disembowelled many a pigmy before they could be roped and dragged reluctantly toward the jungle.

THE next day, on a clearing surrounded by a ring of enormous trees, Jean fettered the four young giraffes; then, climbing on a rough stool, he fed them with infinite patience goat's milk out of a gourd, and tender leaves.

During the following month, the four giraffes were not allowed to pluck their own food. Twice a day, Jean fed them by hand.

After a while, the four growing giraffes were following the white youth like dogs. Then, one morning, a mangy cur of the pigmies got into a frenzy and snapped at Jean—and instantly the pistoning legs of a young giraffe descended on it and smashed its spine.

There was no doubt that Jean was succeeding in inducing the giraffes to fight for him. But that was not enough. To use them effectively, it was necessary to teach them to obey orders. Not shouted ones, because giraffes are deaf as well as dumb; but signal orders.

To such an end, Jean tied the young giraffes so that they were unable to move, and left them in that cramped position for four full days, while he fed them with his own hands. On the fifth morning he untied one of them and, leading it by a halter fastened to its neck, he taught it to advance when he pointed forward, and to stop when he pointed at the ground. Next, he lifted an arm and instantly a pigmy assistant struck with a long pole the knees of the young giraffe, which reacted by vigorously kicking out. That maneuver was repeated time and again, until the giraffe understood that it had to strike with its forehoofs whenever Jean lifted his arm.

The other three young giraffes, subjected to the same treatment, reacted in the same way.

And in this way Jean unknowingly adapted to his giraffes the method used by the Touareg and Chaamba Bedouins to tame their racing camels.

Four years later, in a day somewhat freshened by a northerly wind coming from the marshlands of the basin of the Mbumu river, Baroundo's face was a study of puzzled wonder when Jean put, for his benefit, fifty husky bull giraffes and as many cows through a succession of plain evolutions.

"Whaah!" Baroundo fervently exclaimed when the show was over, "It was very, very wise of you to tame also female giraffes, because, without them, the bulls would inevitably stray away, driven by the mating urge!

"All that I hoped for, in the evening following the capture of your father's fort, is turning true . . . and even more. . . . There's no doubt, the days of the power and of the life of Omdurrah are counted . . . your strong arm and your mind will soon put an end to them!"

Jean scowled at the purple shadows of the sunset flowing along the slopes of a nearby ridge, and said fiercely:

"I wonder what that bloated, murderous dog is doing in this moment."

IV

IN that moment, the savory odor of a dozen antelopes and four goats, broiled whole above huge fires, permeated the air inside of Omdurrah's huge *boma*. Long chains of slaves, looking in the dusk of sunset, like a multitude of enormous black ants, shuffled through the open gates carrying great bunches of plantains and baskets full of yams. Four half-breeds were seasoning a big vat of native beer with ginger, thymes and honey.

It was the time of the evening meal. But a murderous fit of rage convulsed Omdurrah, so that he didn't care to eat. Naroo, the freed slave who had become one of his lieutenants, hung by his tied ankles from the stout branch of an euphorbia tree, right before him.

Naroo's crime was unforgivable, according to Omdurrah's standard. A man of Gounga tribes by birth, captured in his

youth and, to all appearances a trained, hardened slaver, he had forgotten his master's teachings when he had recognized his brother among the bedraggled captives brought in by the last raiding party.

Naroo had not made the mistake of asking his brother's release from Omdurrah. Quite on the contrary, he had made a show of reviling him and of cursing him—and, two nights later, had helped him to escape.

It had been unwise of him because hardly a few minutes had passed when the disgruntled captives left behind reported the evasion to a guard. Now Naroo's brother was dead; Omdurrah's trained baboons had overtaken him and literally torn him to shreds; and Naroo, hanging with his head down and convulsed by sorrow and fright, was being lashed with a long whip of hippopotamus' hide as thick as a rubber hose,

"Ari! Uddah!" Omdurrah gloated every time that the whip snapped into the air, and then imbedded itself with a swishing thud into the torn flesh of Naroo. *"Uddah!* Quicker! Harder!" His big knees were flexed and his tremendous body jerked up and down. His bloodshot eyes were wide-open with excitement, his thick lips curled over his gums, baring his yellow teeth.

Big beads of perspiration shone over the muscular arms of the executioner. His brutish face and small, dull eyes were those of a mental deficient; and he had no pity for Naroo the fool. But he knew that his least mistake and an outburst of Omdurrah's savage temper could put him in Naroo's place, and he didn't want to take any chances. Naroo was to die with appropriate slowness and agony.

"Master," his choppy voice sounded like the bleat of a ram, "if I hit him more he may die."

"Ari! I put another man in his place!" Omdurrah's ribald laughter mounted to the darkening sky.

The executioner jerked up and down his thick, egg-shaped skull, to signify that he had understood, and struck with all his might.

He aimed at the shoulders of the unfortunate Naroo, but, by a chance, in that very instant the tortured man spasmodically flexed his knee, with the result that his head fully received the impact of the blow.

There was a dull thud, a sudden rolling of Naroo's pupils. Then his black face turned green-grey and his whole body relaxed.

Omdurrah cursed, understanding what had happened. For better surety, he pulled a dagger out of his belt and slashed the hanging man. Not a single ripple of pain disturbed the clumsy relaxation of Naroo's body.

But Omdurrah had wanted him to die slowly, as a punishment to gratify his own cruelty.

"You, accursed son of a dog!" he growled and, hunching his immense shoulders, he walked slowly toward the executioner.

The scarlet, dancing light of the torches that were being lighted and stuck into sockets carved in the totem poles all around, threw a sinister glow on the black limbs and the brutal faces of the men of Omdurrah's bodyguard, who stood behind their master. It brought in grim relief the sharpness of the blades topping their spears, and the bushy halos of feathers fastened around their heads and faces.

The executioner slunk back, his mouth agape. His sluggish mind was wrestling with the deathly problem by which it was confronted and could see no way of averting it. And, to fight back would have been suicide.

In the nick of time Omdurrah thought how valuable the man was. His health was good, his strength above the normal, and his teeth were sound. On any slave mart, he could have brought a good price. Moreover, before being promoted to his own present position, he had rendered good service as a trainer of baboons.

"Whaah!" Omdurrah, mastering his rage, decided; "You are no longer my punishing arm. Your women shall be taken away from you. Your hut shall be destroyed and your goats, weapons and coins shall become my property. A naked trainer of monkeys with dog-like faces you were, and a slave trainer of monkeys you shall be again. And your name is no longer Kukas; your name is, now, Dib, the dog."

Kukas's face contracted. His eyes went to the deep scars covering his arms and

legs—the marks left by the ferocious teeth of young baboons. Then he thought of his four wives, and especially of Adima, the tall and shapely Djinge woman, and a moan issued from his lips.

IN the very middle of the fortified camp of Omdurrah stood a shapeless building; with walls of clay hardened by the sun to the consistency of stone, and a roof of soldered iron bars supported by stout poles.

That was the den of the baboon herd, gathered on suggestion of Onunda, a witch doctor of the Nyam-Nyam cannibals who had cast his lot with the giant arch-slaver.

The adult females of the herd wore around their middle section belts of solid iron, which were fastened with chains to stumps of trees imbedded into the ground.

The young male baboons, as soon as weaned, were fed by hand and petted by attendants smeared with a scented mash of ginger roots; and they were cruelly whipped, pelted with stones and slashed with daggers by other attendants smeared with the sap of euphorbia trees. A few weeks of such a treatment were usually enough to induce the young baboons to consider as friends all men scented with ginger, and to attack fiercely everyone who smelled of euphorbia. The hatred for the carriers of euphorbia stench became an instinct and a murderous urge of the trained baboons who reached their full development.

But the skins of all the slaves of Omdurrah were redolent with it. For, every evening, guards with a stout whip in one hand and a murderous spear in the other forced the unfortunate captives of the *boma* to rub their bodies with crushed euphorbia leaves.

As a result, the few slaves who succeeded in escaping had to deal with pursuers more dangerous and fierce than the guards whom they had eluded. No foliage of tree or shady cave could hide them from the piercing, blood-shot eyes and the keen long snouts of the savage monkeys; and, once cornered, their strength was puny compared to the terrible power of the baboons' limbs, and to the slash of their long fangs.

After the kill, the baboons always returned to the *boma* and to their den, their attachment to their mates, the females of the herd, being greater than the lure of freedom.

Kukas had begun his career in Omdurrah's service as a baboon abuser, and had later been promoted to the position of tamer. The latter job, however, was no sinecure; the baboons' ungovernable temper sometimes turned against their friends, and their fangs were terrible. A full-grown baboon could crush a gun barrel with his bite.

Thus Kukas was not gratified when he learned that the last degradation had been spared to him, and that he was assigned to the tamers' group.

A few hours later, two guards holding their spears pointed at his breast sneered and reviled him while his preferred wife was being dragged to the hut of Toubo, Omdurrah's chief lieutenant.

The next morning, he was in the baboons' building when a guard shouted to him:

"Adima is dead! Last night, Touho beat her to convince her that he was her master; but, screaming that you, the strong man, the former executioner, had always been kind to her, she had the daring of striking back. Touho, enraged, hacked her head into a pulp with his battle-ax."

A red screen fell before Kukas' eyes. Throwing down the bunch of fruits with which he was about to regale one of his shrilling charges, he leaped toward the barred door. A female baboon, dragging her chain, got in his way and bit his leg cruelly. Kukas got hold of the heavy club stuck in his belt and brought her down with a terrific blow on top of her skull.

Instantly, a terrific uproar broke loose. Howling frenziedly, all the female baboons strained at their chains, most of the male baboons began to fight among themselves; a swarm of young ones sprang on Kukas.

The former executioner was severely bitten and weak for loss of blood when his companion tamers finally succeeded in dragging his inert body out of the building.

SHEER instinct, more than deliberate planning, because he was far from intelligent, induced Kukas to hide his mad rage and revengeful lust under an appearance of cringing submission. Consequently, the flurry stirred by his outburst

died out quickly, and soon the guards didn't even bother to keep an eye on him.

But Kukas, during his couple of years as a free and highly regarded executioner, had learned the location of every store in the fortified camp, and all the particulars of the organization built by Omdurrah and his assistants.

One day he surreptitiously approached a slave, who belonged also to his own Banda tribe, and said under his breath:

"Tell to all your companions who can be relied upon to keep the secret, that the ginger is stored in the hut near the crocodile totempole. Plenty of ginger mash smeared on your bodies could help you and them to elude the pursuit of the baboons, if you ever succeed in getting out of here."

"What are you going to do, a man of my people who was happy and powerful for too short a time?" the slave whispered.

"I'm going to escape . . . tonight . . . tomorrow . . . whenever the opportunity arises. But I can't take anyone with me. I made an oath by my totem-fetish and I must travel alone until the day of my revenge arrives. . . ."

Three days later, a party was formed to raid the tribes of the southern Bahr el Ghazal. Touho was appointed as their leader.

To him Kukas went humbly, asking to fight under his orders.

Touho looked at him craftily.

"Here," he thought, "is a man who wants to destroy me, and thinks that he may get his chance by joining my war party. But the fool doesn't know that he's playing into my hands, because I don't care for enemies at large.

"I shall accept his services, but I shall also order a trusted man to stick a spear into his body as soon as a day's march separates us from the *boma.*"

To avoid the reporting by spies of the departure of an armed force from his fortress to the white authorities of the three bordering districts of the Uele, the Mbumu and the Bahr el Ghazal, Omdurrah always sent out his raiders under the cover of darkness. Thus, a short hour after the column left the *boma,* Kukas found it easy to step undetected into a dense thicket.

The next day he was rapidly walking toward the south. He had not dared to take the well-beaten trail leading north and to the distant territory of his Banda people, and he had no plan whatsoever, no special hope. He just wanted to get away, eluding all pursuit.

For he had sworn revenge against Omdurrah and his wife's slayer by the ghastly shape of his totem-fetish, and, according to tribal custom, such oaths are long-reaching and independent of the passage of time.

V

IN his escape, the former executioner of Omdurrah carried along his *mokhala,* or long-barreled Arabian muzzle-loader, and plenty of ammunition. But a *mokhala* is made to plant a big, heavy slug —or a charge of scrap iron—into the anatomy of a man, from a short distance. Against hard-to-approach and fleet-footed game, it is of no much use.

To make matters worse, Kukas was a poor marksman. Thus, two weeks later, when he wearily stumbled along a path carved by the hoofs of animals going to a water hole, he was ravenously hungry and ready to challenge the worst dangers of the jungle for the sake of filling his empty belly.

The buffalo that suddenly loomed before him awed him for an instant. It was an enormous beast, with trickles of foam running out of its black snout, bulging blood-shot eyes, and curved horns as thick at the base as a man's calf. But, almost instantly, Kukas thought of savory slabs of buffalo meat roasting on a campfire, and his mouth watered. Bringing the square butt of the *mokhala* resolutely to his shoulder, he pressed the trigger.

The cloud of smoke of the burning black powder momentarily shut the buffalo from his view. Then, as the smoke faded, he saw the buffalo's maroon-brown, rounded side, bulging out of the mud of the path. The buffalo was down, dead! Kukas let forth a howl of happiness and greedy expectancy, slung the *mokhala* across his shoulders and, pulling out his dagger, he darted forward.

Hardly five yards separated him from the fallen beast, when the buffalo's big horns and his dark knees jerked up; then,

with a single motion, the powerful beast arose and charged.

Kukas had no time to realize that the buffalo, slightly wounded, had shammed death. In his wild panic, he was obsessed only by a frenzied urge to put as much space as possible between his spine and the spread of lowered horns aiming at it.

Quick as a flash Kukas turned and ran, but the swelling sound of the buffalo's hoofs forced upon him the terrified realization that, instead of gaining, he was losing ground.

The stout branches of a tree, far above the ground, offered a safe refuge. Kukas reached the tree with a burst of desperate speed, but his arms couldn't encircle its big trunk, and he found little hold on the smooth bark.

Inexperienced climber as he was, Kukas lifted himself up a couple of yards by sheer strength of fingertips and knees, then helplessly slid down. A moan issued from his lips as, closing his eyes, he anticipated the rending impact of the buffalo's horns into his live flesh.

But the instant passed and nothing touched him. A deep silence had succeeded the angry snorting, drumming of hoofs and booming of the buffalo's charge. At length Kukas opened his eyes. Still with his breast flattened against the trunk of the tree, he turned his head.

This time, the buffalo was down for keeps. Shafts of tiny darts sprouted like porcupine quills out of the side that was visible. And, all around the dead beast, stood bearded dwarfs with pot bellies and bow legs.

"The little people of the forest," Kukas panted. "Their poison arrows brought down the great horned one just in time to save my life . . . but, what are they going to do with me, now?"

As in answer to that query, a pigmy who wore a necklace of feathers, bones and monkeys' paws, addressed him:

"From where you come, O man who doesn't know how to fight buffaloes?"

"From the north," Kukas weakly said.

"In the northern Uele, Omdurrah rules. He is an evil man," the pigmy snarled.

A surge of hope, mixing with the hysteria of weariness and a boiling of his wild hatred, brought a cry to Kukas' lips:

"Omdurrah ordered my wife's doom, humiliated and abused me! If I could only meet him alone, with my bare hands I would tear him limb from limb!"

"You hate Omdurrah? *Whaah!* I'll bring you to Lion King!" the pigmy grinned, shaking his fuzzy bearded head up and down. "But, if your words are false, you shall die as the buffalo did."

AFTER questioning Kukas at length, Jean and Baroundo realized that his mental equipment was low, but never caught him in a contradiction. Besides, the marks of a sorrow that couldn't have been simulated were unmistakably on his features.

The next day Jean said to Mbouro:

"The information brought by the poor fellow whom you saved has suggested me a plan. . . .

"The foundations of Omdurrah's power lay in his slave trade. The raids give him the booty with which he pays his warriors, and the sale of slaves gives him the money with which he buys weapons and much needed supplies from Arabian traders.

"Therefore I'll strike at his slaver's empire. I'll help as many of his slaves as possible to escape, and I'll band them into a fighting force . . . but I need your help, Mbouro!"

"My men and I cannot fight the big warriors of Omdurrah, O Lion King," the pigmy chief whined. "We are too small, too few, we can't move with speed on our short legs. . . ."

"But you can hide escaped slaves in the jungle and the forest," Jean interrupted.

"That we can easily do, O young warrior with the wisdom of an old and experienced chief," the relieved Mbouro replied. "Only we know which are the narrow lanes of firm ground running through wide areas, where the tall grass hides quicksands that will swallow a man or beast in less time than it takes to chew a yam. And, either in the thick jungle or in the gloom of the forest, our poisoned darts are more than a match for the sticks which spit fire and the spears of the slavers."

That same night Jean strode resolutely north, and Baroundo and Kukas went with him. Besides their arrows, their spears and the *mokhala*, they had a powerful weapon, the old army rifle which Baroundo

had not used, but carefully cleansed and greased for years; and cartridges which, having been broken out of a soldered tin container, were as good as new.

A LARGE stretch of well-kept fields extended all around Omdurrah's *boma*. Each field was tilled and attended to, from sunrise to sunset, by several slaves. A grove of plantations was separated from the others by wide stretches of rocky, sterile ground alternated with patches of thick trees. This particular grove was in the care of a headman and six guards, who usually kept some two-score men working under them.

Early one morning, just as the darkness of the night had faded and the sky was turning gray, the party of slave workers and their guards had reached that outlying field and the headman ordered a halt, when three strange, menacing figures jumped out of a bush and quickly leveled guns at their breasts.

They were a grizzled negro, unknown to him, and Kukas, recently surnamed Dib, or dog, and a third stranger, a tall, powerfully muscled white youth, stark naked except for a breech cloth, who carried a quiver slung across his shoulders and a long-bladed spear in his hand.

"Obey, or we kill!" the white youth warned.

The headman was a strong, veteran fighter; but he liked to live and, in the past, his *rapport* with Kukas had been friendly. Therefore, instinctively his glance sought that of the former executioner, who, according to the instructions that Jean had forced him to memorize, blurted:

"Do as the white chief says, and you'll keep your freedom and your life."

"What shall I do?" the headman asked Jean, after a short reflection.

"I want you and the two guards behind you to lift your hands," Jean replied. "I want, also, you to order the other guards to come forward with their arms stretched over their heads."

The headman barked the necessary commands. Two of the distant guards obeyed readily. A third one suddenly brought up his rifle. But, before he could fire, Baroundo dropped him with a well-aimed bullet.

An answering bullet sped from the rear of the column. The headman turned his head hopefully; but no second shot rang out; and, a few moments later, the high-pitched cry of triumph of Mbouro came from behind the close-packed ranks of the slaves: "My dart stuck that great fool between the shoulders."

Jean and Baroundo quickly disarmed the five surviving guards. Kukas hastened to pick up the weapons of the two dead ones. Then Kukas addressed the slaves:

"Cover all traces of blood. Wrap the garments of the slain around their wounds, to avoid drops of gore leaving a tell-tale trail after us."

"Where are you going to lead us, O Kukas?" the boldest of the slaves said.

"To freedom and revenge. But the white man is the chief. He is the one whom you must obey from now on."

The guns and the pistols of the disarmed guards were given to slaves who professed to have some knowledge of firearms. The guards themselves were placed in the middle of a compact group of their former charges. Finally Jean commanded the freed slaves to take along the two corpses and all working implements, and marched them toward the east, The red disk of the sun was rising on the sky when he ordered a halt to bury the slain guards and the working tools. Then again the column swung on the march, and the slaves began whispering that they had a chance of reaching the Bahr el Ghazal some time the next day.

Two hours later, however, Jean ordered them to enter the waters of a very wide and shallow tributary river which flowed southwest. They marched in the water for several hours, and around noon, always splashing knee deep in the beds of a succession of streams which criss-crossed each other, the column began moving on a winding course in a southerly direction.

It was only late in the afternoon that Jean led the fugitives out of their watery trail and onto dry ground.

At that point Kukas, who had been severely bitten by an enormous crab, growled ill-humoredly:

"Why all this useless walking in circles with our feet kicking in the water, O Lion King?"

"Because I want to fool Omdurrah,

lower his prestige in his *boma,* and keep the location of my jungle lair hidden," Jean grunted.

"Whaah! I don't understand. . . ."

"Tonight," Jean explained, "Omdurrah shall be enraged because the slaves whom we delivered, and the guards who are our prisoners, will not return to the *boma.* But it is only tomorrow morning when the light will allow it, that he'll send a party of warriors to look for them.

"And what shall these warriors find? No signs of struggle . . . tracks leading toward the east . . . everything pointing out that the guards made common cause with the slaves in their custody, or were caught by surprise and easily overpowered by them.

"Omdurrah's warriors will push forward, always following our tracks, until they meet the shallow river which we waded first. If you remember well, Kukas, there was a rocky bank on the eastern side of that river. Omdurrah's scouts will run all over it and past it, and find nothing. Out of desperation they'll send for some hunting baboons, who'll smell the stench of the rotting blood and find the place where the two slain guards are buried, and also the tools. But the baboons' keen scent will be of no avail to them on the running waters of the river. And, O Kukas, what will be said in Omdurrah's *boma* when all the searching shall be over?"

Kukas thought hard. At length a grin spread over his thick features.

"The mystery of the disappearance of the slaves will cause much uneasy talk," he rumbled, "and many will whisper that Omdurrah has incurred the displeasure of some powerful totem-ghosts."

Early the next morning, a dozen slaves belonging to the Makabetu tribes asked to be allowed to return to their people. Baroundo, knowing that the Makabetu were good dancers and fine wood-carvers, but unwilling fighters, told Jean to set them free on condition that they escort the captured guards to their village and keep them prisoners for a year.

That suited Jean, because he didn't intend to put the guards to death and he didn't want to bring them to his jungle lair. And he was fully convinced that he needed much less than a year's time to bring about the downfall of Omdurrah.

THE failure of the hunting baboons to catch up with the escaped slaves turned out to be a much greater blow to Omdurrah's prestige than Jean and Kukas had hoped for. Because, to the rage and the confusion that was the direct result of it, there was soon succeeded a superstitious dread.

Finally, the totem-worshiping warriors asked Onunda and the other witch-doctors to conjure potent spells. Onunda complied. With his fellow masters of *hyondo,* or sorcery, he went through frenzied dances, brewed ill-smelling concoctions, scattered powders and even ordered slaves slain and drank some of their blood.

But the day came when all the exhausted witch-doctors were forced to confess their impotency. Whereupon, the Moslem followers of Omdurrah cried out that, to avert a disaster, everyone in the *boma* had to accept the creed of Allah.

Onunda, threatened with the loss of his authority and power, cursed them and shrieked that they were the ones who had enraged the totem-ghosts with the practice of a creed that was alien to the jungle and the bush.

Finally the two factions came to blows. Soon weapons were brought into play and the fortified camp became the scene of savage fighting. When Omdurrah finally succeeded in restoring order, some hundred slaves had succeeded in escaping, taking advantage of the confusion. And the survivors of the outnumbered Moslem slavers asked to be allowed to leave.

Omdurrah raged and stormed, but the Moslems remained adamant. Finally the giant chieftain decided to surrender to the inevitable.

He could not order a wholesale massacre of his Moslems, because the news of it was bound to spread, and his purveyors of ammunition and weapons, as well as his best customers in the black-ivory, or slave trade, were Arabian freebooting merchants. After asking the Moslem warriors to swear on the Koran that they would never bear weapons against him, or interfere with his activities, he allowed them to go away with their possessions, families and retinues of slaves.

Thus Omdurrah lost seventy-five men, expert in the use of firearms. With him remained some five hundred brutish war-

riors. He had also fifty fighters in his *boma* at the southern edge of the Bahr el Ghazal, and another hundred in his camp hidden in the swamps of the Mbumu. But, a couple of weeks later, Omdurrah learned that the discharged Moslems had visited the Bahr el Ghazal stronghold and persuaded its garrison to join them, the whole party vanishing into the wastes of English Sudan.

The hundred-odd slaves who left the camp while the fighting raged did not go stranded, for Kukas and one of the escaped slaves, who had returned to spy in the neighborhood of the *boma,* intercepted the bewildered fugitives and led them to the safety of Jean's jungle lair along the circuitous water route adopted by the young chieftain. The failure of the baboons to overtake this second and larger group of runaways was an added blow to Omdurrah's fast-waning prestige.

But Omdurrah was no fool. Instead of asking Onunda to make additional incantations, he personally carried through an exhausting investigation. The result of it was that he noticed how his store of ginger roots was rapidly becoming depleted. But, instead of attempting to force confessions out of the three or four hundred slaves who remained in his power, he decided to detail picked men to watch the vicinity of the hut near the crocodile totem-pole.

THREE nights later that provision of the wily chieftain was rewarded. The watchers saw two slaves crawling toward the hut, breaking into it. Instead of giving the alarm, they waited until the fugitives came out, and when they climbed over an unguarded corner of the stockade, followed after them.

Shortly after, the spies lost the escaped slaves from view. They were about to return to the *boma,* when they noticed the dull gleam of steel under the moonlight.

The former slave who incautiously had emerged out of a thicket holding his spear, was a lookout for a party of twelve scouts despatched by Jean. With his senses dulled by a long period of captivity, he never realized that he had attracted the attention of the cleverest human blood-hounds of Omdurrah's savage outfit.

A few hours later, he gave up his watch. With his companions, he retraced his way toward the east. Omdurrah's men went after them until they reached the first stream of the winding water-trail. But, by that time, dawn was breaking and the shores of the shallow river were bare of vegetation. Omdurrah's spies, who were only five and armed only with daggers, did not risk being discovered. Convinced that they had found out enough, they hastened back to their master.

Omdurrah's thick lips curled fiercely, baring his wolfish teeth, when he heard the spies' report. That same afternoon, he ordered all slaves confined under a double cordon of guards. For seven days,. they all remained there, the hapless captives chained to logs. The work of the fields was discontinued. Men were sent to meet all returning raiding parties with orders to convey the newly captured tribesmen to the *boma* of the Mbumu swamps. And, during all that time, two hundred warriors stood ambushed near the banks of the shallow river, beginning of escape route adopted by Jean. The result was that four of the slaves sent as explorers by the young white leader were discovered. But, knowing that capture meant torture as well as eventual death, they stabbed themselves with their knives at the moment of capture.

Meanwhile, chosen men smeared with ginger-mash abused the hunting baboons with red-hot blades stuck on the ends of long poles, and men perfumed with costly sweet-scented resin, of which Omdurrah had a store looted from a caravan in the Bahr el Ghazal, brought all the food in the baboons' den.

When the baboons had thoroughly learned to detest the carriers of ginger scent, Omdurrah changed his tactics. Instead of keeping a force ambushed near the shallow river, he scattered well-hidden men all along its course, with orders to keep a lookout for unidentified negroes coming from the south, and to trail them to their stronghold.

So it was that a couple of weeks later Omdurrah knew of a valley, far to the south, where camped a naked white giant, Kukas and many escaped slaves. Luckily for Jean, Omdurrah's spies didn't surmise that that valley was only a meeting place and not the true headquarters of the young white man.

Omdurrah felt great relief when he

learned the true nature of the threat which he had instinctively felt hovering over him. He reached the conclusion that Jean and the few men with him could not constitute any real menace.

"This white man," he confided to Onunda, "must be an Arab. Some brotherhood of Arabian slavers must have banded together—probably somewhere in the Bahr el Ghazal—and they want to draw me south with most of my warriors in order to capture this stronghold."

"True," Onunda approved that line of reasoning. "Because who, excepting a white Arab, could be this white man bent on your destruction? All other white men in the jungle, the bush and the forest, are chiefs of soldiers. And soldiers do not use ambushes and liberated slaves to bring about the downfall of a Sultanj like you. Soldiers come marching all together, with plenty of fast-firing guns, and nothing can stand before them.

"Yes, Omdurrah. Your black ivory trade, being very prosperous, is coveted by Arab slavers who want to seize your empire."

"But I'm too clever for them," Omdurrah snarled. "The day will come when the jackals who think to grow fat on my spoils will be slashed to pieces."

"Wait for them here," Onunda confirmed. "Send the baboons to destroy the lone young naked Arab, down south, and those who are with him. To insure your victory I shall make a magic. . . ."

But Omdurrah had no longer faith in Onunda's incantations. Snarling fierce curses, he hastened to take steps to send his murderous baboons south, together with a score of men who knew how to deal with them.

VI

THE position chosen by Jean as a secondary base was a flat-topped knoll dotted with boulders. Plenty of dry branches were always heaped on its edge to feed the campfires which, after sunset, are necessary in the African bush-lands to ward off the swift raids of lions and leopards.

The wide expanse of flat ground all around the knoll was covered with scanty vegetation. On the north, it was bordered by a sparse wood. On the south, by the steep slope of a ridge.

No isolated man in daytime, and no force of warriors or herd of animals at night, could have advanced on the knoll without attracting the attention of the lookout posted on its biggest boulder.

Usually, some twenty liberated slaves and a dozen pigmies camped with Jean on the knoll, and the giraffes plucked the leaves of the trees growing on the plain south of it.

The giraffes had a sub-leader in the person of the proud Mbouro, because Jean, aware that his herd of efficiently fighting, but very stupid, giraffes needed a commander when he was busy elsewhere, had trained them also to obey the pigmy chief.

Baroundo would have greatly liked to direct the giraffes and had been humiliated by the preference conferred on Mbouro, but Jean had explained to him:

"All the negro fighters of Omdurrah look like you in an animal's eyes. If the giraffes should learn to obey you, they would obey also any man of Omdurrah who would succeed in learning our signal-code. On the contrary, there are no pigmies in Omdurrah's bands, and so I have selected Mbouro and not you."

A BREEZE, coming from the south, brought the scent of the slaves at the farthest outpost to the nostrils of the first swarm of baboons to enter the wood. As it was their custom, the baboons spread at once in a wide semi-circle and rushed from every side. Too late, the terrorized slaves sighted the murderous monkeys. Their desperate dash for safety brought them only to the edge of the wood, where they were overtaken and torn to shreds.

The startled cry of the lookout on the knoll warned Jean, who, helpless to interfere, saw the massacre. For a split second the young white chieftain remained speechless, appalled by the ferocity of the baboons. Then his mind raced. It did not matter how his well-covered trail had been discovered. . . . The baboons were pouring out of the wood in increasing numbers, and there was horrible death in their long sharp teeth, and in the power of the muscles swelling on their chunky shoulders . . . and the sun was low on the western sky.

"In a short while it will be dark, and my giraffes, unable to see the command-signals, will be left to their resources . . . they will be set upon and destroyed one after another by the baboons and by the warriors who are with them. . . ."

Thus Jean thought feverishly. To Mbouro he cried at the top of his lungs:

"Lead the giraffes to the top of the ridge, O mighty little chief. No matter how the combat goes here, don't return to help me until the break of dawn!"

From the plain below, Mbouro's screech came with the rustle of the wind:

"Harraa. . . . What's happening?"

"The baboons of Omdurrah come!"

"Then run! Let's all go together to the top of the ridge. . . ."

"I could safely cross the plain, with the men who are with me! But, on the steep slope of the ridge, the baboons, who are better climbers, would catch up with us, and kill us one by one. . . . The little fighters of your tribe, especially, would have no chance. But lose no more time . . . go with the giraffes, Mbouro! And do not worry about us! Our position is easy to defend. Somehow, we will last through the night. . . ."

"And after sunrise, the giraffes' hoofs will make pulp of the baboons! *Aihee!*" Mbouro shouted shrilly, and, keeping his arms stretched toward the top of the ridge, he ran as fast as he was able to on his short, bowed legs. Several giraffes caught a glimpse of his motions and strode majestically toward the ridge. The rest of the herd gradually followed them.

But Mbouro's face had turned muddy gray with fear when he reached the top of the ridge. Although he would have hated to confess it, he was deathly afraid of baboons, and the idea of clashing with them in the darkness gave him the shivers. The orders that he had received gratified his cowardice and at the same time soothed his ego with the justification that he was carrying through a warlike ruse, necessary to the final success of his white friend's plans.

Spurred by the hideous screams of their tamers, the baboons made straight for the knoll. They ran like dogs on all fours, keeping their tails high in a stiff arch. Their eyes shone like live coals, their lips were curled, uncovering their long, gleaming white fangs.

Six of the slaves had guns of various vintages which they had stolen at the moment of their escape from the *boma;* but, following Jean's orders, they held their fire. The nearest baboons were only fifty or sixty yards away from the knoll, when the six guns and twenty-seven bows entered into play.

It was a deadly volley; a score of baboons were killed outright, three others, wounded, broke the shafts of the arrows sticking out of their sides with their teeth and paws, and rolled on the ground, howling wildly. But the rest of the baboon herd swept on, and soon reached the square formed by Jean's men.

There was a moment of ferocious fighting, with spears striking at top speed and axes smashing down terrific blows. Three slaves and a pigmy fell, with the rending paws of several baboons tearing their breasts and arms, and ferocious fangs searching for their throat. But the poison arrows of the pigmies broke the charge.

They held them in a bunch in their right fist, the little warriors, and, as soon as they released the string and an arrow, they cocked a second arrow and pulled the string again in a single motion; and the poison on their arrow-tips killed as fast as the venom of a mamba snake.

Finally the baboons ran away, and their furred bodies loomed in the gathering darkness like enormous rats' backs scurrying in all directions. But five of the bloodthirsty monkeys refused to give up tearing the bodies of the fallen slaves, and were hacked to death with strokes of axes and spears over their victims.

"Master," one of the pigmies suddenly whined, "our supply of arrows is running low."

Jean gritted his teeth. More than fifty baboons had been slain, but it was possible to see more than twice that number, at the very least, had survived the first onset of the combat. Sitting on their haunches, or rocking on all fours at a safe distance, they kept an ear-splitting din of wild jabbering and ferious howls.

THE sun had faded behind the western brim of the horizon and the long purplish shadows, forerunners of darkness, were spreading over the plain. Jean heard a few barked commands, saw a fluctuation

in the baboons' ranks, and hastily gave the order to set on fire the branches heaped on the edge of the knoll.

The flames leaped up just in time to stop the catapulting baboon horde on their tracks. For a few minutes their fierce eyes gleamed in the darkness behind the burning branches, and served as a target for the volley of bullets and arrows which sped against them. Loud squeals announced that every projectile had found its mark. Then the baboon horde scuttled back.

But, soon after, their keepers brought their guns into play. They had the advantage of firing from concealment—only the spurts of flame from their guns giving a fleeting idea of the places where they hid. The knoll, on the contrary, was fully lighted by the burning branches.

One after another, four of Jean's men were killed or wounded. The others hid among the boulders. But, during the following hours, they had to come out to keep the fire going, and, as soon as they did so, a hail of bullets sped toward them.

Jean knew how to handle a gun, but had never become a marksman for the simple reason that the supply of cartridges carried by Baroundo was too small to justify the waste of bullets for target practice. Baroundo could hit a speeding antelope at a distance of three hundred yards, but Baroundo was far away in the jungle, training the strongest of the liberated slaves to become warriors. None of the men with Jean could shoot well.

Early in the morning, a grim desperation gripped Jean and he felt the icy wing of death drawing near.

The fire was dying out and there were only a few branches left to revive it. Half of the men who had made the first stand with him were either dead or wounded. He himself had been hit by two glancing bullets, and bled from the hip and shoulder.

An additional hour of clutching fear passed. Then the last flames simmered down; only a red ring of embers shone on the edge of the knoll; and, suddenly, the howling of the baboons rent the air. There was a volley coming from the plain, a moment of silence, a new burst of jabbering and hellish howls; then the frenzied baboon horde swept onward, up the short, easy climb leading to the top of the knoll.

Jean and the handful of desperate men with him fought savagely. Striking right and left at whirling speed, they hacked and stabbed at one furry body after another, cringed and snarled when they heard the desperate yell of one of their own who was being pulled down and atrociously slain by tearing monkeys' hands and crushing fangs, hacked with savage blows the broad, furry backs of the beasts as they wriggled above their fallen companions.

Several times Jean's great strength enabled him to break out of the clutch of a baboon's hand, and to lift the snarling beast transfixed on the long blade of his spear. But finally, he felt his strength ebbing away and thought that the end was near.

IN the furious tempo of the fighting, however, he had not noticed that the sky was turning gray. And, a quarter of an hour later, he hardly realized that he had won when he saw the long necks of the giraffes bobbing ludicrously all around the knoll.

But the stony calm of the expression of the giraffes' muzzles belied the destructive efficiency of their pistoning forehoofs, which, after scattering and killing most of the keepers, tore into the compact ranks of the baboons.

A few of the savage monkeys swarmed all over some bull giraffes and managed to kill them by severing their jugular veins with terrific bites; but, when the stricken giraffes collapsed, they fell also, and other giraffes broke their spines with terrible kicks.

When the red disk of the sun arose on the sky, it was all over. Most of the baboons of Omdurrah's herd had been destroyed. The survivors were cut forever from the *boma* by the shock of their defeat and the death of their keepers, and by the factor that too many distractions were bound to interfere with their return to their distant kennels.

The triumphant Mbouro danced all around Jean.

"It was hard for me to wait, O Lion King!" the little chief boasted. "If I did, it was only against my wish, because you had ordered it!"

Of course, he didn't say that abject terror had sickened him during the night and

that only with a supreme effort had he braced himself at the break of dawn and led the giraffes down the ridge, to the rescue.

But Jean hardly heard him. A conviction was obsessing him that he had to strike, and quickly, before the wily Omdurrah could find out that he had lost his fighting baboons.

VII

FIRST of all, however, Jean decided to abandon the knoll for a distant location unknown to Omdurrah and his cutthroats. He finally chose a ridge covered by dense vegetation, confronting wide stretches of bare ground on the north, east and west, and connected by a succession of gullies with the jungles of the south.

At his new secondary base, he collected the valiant survivors of his little band and an additional score of fighting men, requested by messenger from Baroundo. The giraffes he sent south, because he planned to use them in the final drive and didn't want to run the danger of having them peppered with shot during his absence by some roving band of Omdurrah's warriors.

Then, all alone, he began his northward march toward the stronghold of his enemy; but, to avoid tracing an indiscreet trail of footprints, he traveled most of the time by the aerial route, swinging from tree to tree, or waded the beds of shallow streams.

Two days later, always concealed by thickets and in the shade of boulders and ravines, he cautiously circled Omdurrah's *boma*.

From two sides, the ground rose rapidly to meet the esplanade, over which the sinister fortress hovered like the shapeless carcass of some immense beast. A ragged depression of the ground, torn by countless rain storms, wound around the eastern side of the stockade. But its northern approaches were flat and thickly wooded.

The reason nothing had been done to clear the ground before that part of the *boma's* defenses was a superstitious one, Jean had learned from a baboon-keeper captured at the end of the combat of the knoll.

Omdurrah was the son of a half-breed bandit of the Bahr el Ghazal. But his mother was the daughter of a Nyam-Nyam headman, worshiper of the leopard totem, so that Omdurrah, reared in the fear of the leopard ghost, had not dared to order the clearing of a wood where, for several generations, members of various leopard societies had held their cannibalistic practices of worship.

Fearfully rolling his eyes because, to loosen his tongue, Mbouro kept a bent bow and a poisoned arrow aimed at his breast, the baboon-keeper had added:

"I heard that, once every ten moons, the leopard men of the *boma* drag a slave in that wood, cut his throat and gather his blood into a gourd, which they pass all around chanting the words of the leopard totem-ritual: 'We have our food and drink and our ancestor, the mighty leopard ghost, is pleased.' I heard also that Omdurrah never fails to assist to these celebrations. But, he just traces magic patterns on his face with the slave's blood for good luck, and carries some of the chopped flesh as an offering to the little wooden leopard of the totem pole that's planted near the jujube tree, under which he holds his councils.

"Onunda and his assistant priests of *hyondo* carved that leopard statue and made spells and incantations near it, to invest it with magic power. Everybody in the *boma* considers it as the emblem of the luck and power of Omdurrah."

The wooden fetish and the hope of finding an opportunity of shooting an arrow into Omdurrah's big body, were the objectives of Jean's expedition. He knew that he would not find it difficult to enter the *boma* by the aerial route, because the branches of the trees clustered against the outer part of the stockade, and those of some of the trees growing inside of it, met above a stretch of sentry walk.

JEAN spent three days observing the comings and goings of the guards on duty at the stockade. After sunset, he rehearsed aerial reconnoitering trips all over the wood.

The third night he launched his raid. Swinging from branch to branch, he vaulted over an unsuspecting lookout on the sentry walk. A few minutes later, he was in the very center of Omdurrah's stronghold.

He had a good description of the building where Omdurrah lived, but he found

all of its massive doors locked, and no way of forcing the barred windows without stirring an uproar. To his utter disappointment, he had to remand his reckoning with his enemy to a latter date; but there was a sleepy sentry squatting before a fire, near the ju-jube tree and the leopard totem-pole.

That sentry awakened for a fleeting instant with the back of his head stuck between two big stones, the left hand of Jean on his throat, and a hard knee and the full weight of the white youth's body on his breast. Then Jean's right fist hit his chin with the power of a battering ram, and the sentry plunged into an unnatural sleep that was bound to last for a full hour.

Thereafter, Jean didn't lose time in throwing a mess of burning branches on the thatched roof of a big warrior's hut, which instantly caught fire. Then he grasped the leopard-fetish, which was of light wood decorated with brass disks and easy to carry, and swiftly clambered up the trunk of the ju-jube tree.

A few minutes later he was safely back into the wood, and shouted exultantly at the sight of the conflagration raging inside the fortress.

Having no special use for the wooden leopard, Jean smashed it and threw its pieces in the slime of a bog, where they faded out of sight.

Then, as he traced his way back to his base, he decided to assemble all his followers and to lead them north as soon as possible. He knew that he would find it easy to carry into the *boma,* by the aerial route, enough of them to overpower the guards at the gate; and he didn't doubt that, once the portals of the *boma* were thrown open, the sudden onslaught of the main body of his liberated slaves and pigmies would make short work of the sleepy and disheartened warriors of Omdurrah.

If he had known what was occurring at the *boma,* the success of his daring plan would have seemed assured; for, in spite of the pleading and the threatening of Omdurrah, his staunchest supporters, the warriors belonging to the leopard and tiger cat societies, were leaving the *boma.*

The destruction of their huts and belongings, and the death of their goats, due to the fire started by Jean, had irritated them. The disappearance of the leopard fetish, together with the news brought by a weary and badly scared keeper that the baboon herd had been annihilated, had taken all the spunk out of them. But the final blow to their wavering allegiance had been the tale of the sentry who had been knocked out by Jean.

"He was an enormous ghost, red and shiny like live flame. His hands were harder than stones and wider than gourds. His knees were as large as shields and tremendously heavy. In his clutches, I felt as weak and puny as a pullet." Thus the terrorized savage had described Jean, as his eyes, distorted by fear, had seen him in the scarlet glow of the bivouac. Then, with awe, he had added: "That the jungle spirit did not take my life is no doubt due to the fact that he hates only his rival the leopard ghost, and the leopard men . . . and he knew that I belong to the hippopotamus people. . . ."

Omdurrah was thus deprived of the services of an additional two hundred fighters, all armed with guns. Two hundred and fifty warriors still remained with him. But that was an insignificant force, compared with the thousand warriors and the fierce baboon herd who, for years, had made a password of terror of his name over an enormous expanse of territory.

THAT very night, hurry and his hatred of Omdurrah induced Jean to discard his usual caution and to make a short cut across a stretch of unknown jungle. There, his eyes well accustomed to the darkness, could see where he was putting his feet, but, negligible as it was, the rustle of his body brushing against branches and festoons of leaves, cut out from his eardrums the soft thud of paws padding in the surrounding thickets.

Suddenly, ahead of him, yellow eyes shone close to the ground. A savage hiss swelled into a full-throated snarl. In the nick of time Jean threw up his spear and met in midair the shape of the leopard, black in the darkness, which was leaping at his throat.

The sturdy shaft of the spear twisted in his fist; the muscles of his arm strained under the impact of the leopard spitting itself on the long blade of the spear. But, in that same instant, a furry bundle of hellish fury catapulted on his shoulders and

smashed him down. Blindly rolling and endeavoring to defend himself with the speed and strength of desperation against the whirlwind of tearing claws striking at him from every side, Jean cursed the second leopard which, in ambush on an overhanging branch, had waited until his attention was attracted by the second spotted killer before launching its onslaught.

Jean inhaled a breathful of the fetid scent of carrion issuing from the leopard's maw, and, jerking his head and shoulders, avoided by a fraction of an inch the terrible fangs slashing at his jugular. Then his hand was on the hilt of the dagger stuck in his belt. Talons seared his breast, sides and shoulders like streaks of fire, but his strong fist struck, time and again, imbedding the dagger in the leopard's twisting body.

Just as quickly as the fury of its attack had begun, the struggles of the second leopard ceased. The weakening Jean pulled the dagger out of the neck of the slain beast and stumbled to his feet. He felt the hot blood pouring out of his wounds and almost went down in a fit of dizziness. With a supreme effort he retrieved his quiver and bow, but he had to leave his spear imbedded into the carcass of the first leopard; the strain of pulling it out would have proved too much for his fading strength.

But his troubles were not over. He knew that, before long, he would collapse and also that, to remain inert and bleeding in the darkness of the jungle meant death under the fangs of the next beast of prey that came along.

Therefore, straining all his will power to master the excruciating pain, he managed to reach a clearing, located a big boulder, and dug a niche under one of its sides. Then he heaped a ring of dry branches before that makeshift shelter, slid onto the damp sod of its bottom, and, striking a piece of flint which he always carried in his quiver with the sharp pommel of his dagger, he drew enough sparks to set the branches afire.

He had cheated death by a mere instant because, immediately after, he lost consciousness.

Soon hyenas and jackals, attracted by the scent of blood, climbed on the boulder and were driven back by the heat of the fire blazing under them. Other hungry scavengers of the jungle prowled before the barrier of burning branches, and ravenously stared at the supine body, smeared with gore, laying so still in the scarlet glow, with the rough rock of the boulder only a few inches above his forehead. But no hyena or jackal dared to leap through the fiery screen of the leaping flames.

When the gray of dawn spread on the sky, Jean awakened spent, feverish and desperately thirsty. Thickly caked blood stuck into the wounds covering his stiffened body.

The fire, which had saved him during the night, was dying out. But the jackals and the hyenas were gone. Driven by hunger, they had turned on each other; and a few leopards had come and joined in the fight. Before they could escape, two jackals and a young hyena had been slain by the leopards, who had feasted on them. Early in the morning the hyenas had returned and crunched and swallowed every grisly shred of hide and bone left by the leopards; then, growling their sinister laughter of everlasting hunger, they had trotted hunchbacked toward their dens.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, a pigmy posted as a lookout on the ridge, saw a grimy, stumbling scarecrow of a man advancing slowly on the plain below. For several instants the pigmy watched, unwilling to believe his eyes. Then, squealing hysterically, he ran down the slope, and a swarm of liberated slaves catapulted after him, cursing the destiny that had finally turned against their beloved white chief.

The effort of a day's march in his desperate condition had reduced Jean's vitality to a low ebb. Once among his men, the desperate grit which had held him up for so many hours gave way to complete collapse. That same night he was burning with a high temperature, and delirious.

For two full weeks, as long as pus kept on forming in his wounds, Jean failed to regain the use of his faculties. Consequently, the spirit of defeat which had descended on Omdurrah's *boma* remained unexploited. Eventually Onunda, the witch doctor, recovered some of his brazeness and announced that in a vision he had seen several all-powerful ghosts and animal totems which had promised him the annihilation of the flame-colored ghost and

of all the human enemies of Omdurrah. Then, he executed a frenzied ceremonial dance, and drank a magic beverage concocted by his assistant witch doctors.

In a sudden burst of activity, Omdurrah sent out one third of his depleted force as spies and scouts, with orders to find out the strength, resources, and if possible, the intentions of his strange foes.

Two weeks later, when Jean's condition had ceased being desperate, most of Omdurrah's explorers had returned.

From the news that they brought, the sinister chieftain realized that no rivals for the black ivory trade were after his domain, and that his only enemies were a small tribe of pigmies, his escaped slaves and a great warrior, a young white man, called Lion King who was actually incapacitated by dangerous wounds.

"Is this white man a leader of soldiers?" Omdurrah wondered.

"No, Sultanj," one of the scouts replied, "unseen by them, I heard some escaped slaves saying that he's the son of a chief of a soldier and a white woman whom you deceived and killed, long ago. I heard also that this very brave white man is the lord of the giraffes and can climb trees as dexterously as a monkey."

The eyes of shrewd Omdurrah went to the bare totem pole and the ju-jube tree close to it. Then they strayed to the bridge of entwined branches above the northern section of the stockade.

"Take the man who said that a light skinned ghost overpowered him, and tear his lying tongue out of his mouth." Omdurrah at length roared, jumping up and down in a fit of uncontrollable rage.

Some time later, he regaled the scout with a roll of red calico and two yards of shiny copper wire; then, waving away angrily the thanks of the gratified savage, he hissed:

"Take as many men as you want . . . find out where's this wounded white warrior . . . how many followers he has with him . . . all about his giraffes. You have a starting point for your investigations; the place where you listened to the jabbering of the escaped slaves.

"I shall give you all the women you want, twenty goats and many, many other gifts if you succeed; but, if you fail, your punishment shall be death."

VIII

JEAN suffered a relapse. For ten days his fever mounted, and delirium drew a wild chatter out of his mouth. Finally a morning came when he awakened, desperately weak but clear-headed, and smiled weakly at the anxious face of Baroundo.

"It will take time before you can get again on your feet," Baroundo regretted. "But, master, it is good to hear you again. While you lay unconscious and feverish, I was unable to think clearly. . . ."

"Where is Mbouro?" Jean stammered.

"In the open valley between the jungle and the forest, with his tribe of the little people. Only five of his pigmies are with us, and they spend most of their time eating and sleeping. But all the escaped slaves, more than a hundred and fifty of them, are with us. . . ."

Jean closed his eyes.

"I did well," he hazily thought, "to choose a locality unknown to the slaves. Poor Baroundo . . . he means well, but his mind is poor . . . he allows the pigmies to gorge themselves into a comatose state. And the slaves are but poor lookouts. It is well that I shall soon be on my feet."

When he reopened his eyes, Baroundo, who squatted near his couch, greeted him with a toothy smile. On the knees of the squatting former orderly there was a businesslike rifle, which he was carefully cleansing; the rifle which he had carried away, in the night when Omdurrah overran the Post of Lieutenant Rosen.

THE sun climbed on the sky and the heat became stifling. Through the opening of the hut, Jean saw the eddies of heat haze shimmering. The drone of a big fly was in his ears and a subdued, confused clamor of insect life came from the green bushes outside.

"It is the first time that I have had the babbling-sickness," Jean thought. "But it is good to be alive. . . . Soon I shall be well and . . ."

Like a peal of thunder, the firing gun of a lookout posted on the summit of the ridge interrupted his thought. Then, far in the distance, rang a throbbing tattoo.

"The drums of advancing warriors!" Baroundo snarled, jumping to his feet with rifle in hand. His desperate glance met the

serene eyes of Jean, who only said calmly:

"Only one man would come as a chief of warriors against this ridge—Omdurrah. . . ."

Baroundo shouted a frenzied curse and ran out of the hut.

To Kukas, who was coming up the slope with a dozen slaves, he shouted:

"Build up a litter. Select three relays of carriers of four strong men each, and ten additional men armed with guns to protect them. Take all the pigmies who are with us as guides, and carry the master, Jean, to the camp of Mbouro."

After that, Baroundo despatched the three best runners of his party to warn Mbouro to hasten toward the litter conveying the disabled white youth.

Some slaves were already firing against the advancing warriors. The reports of firing guns, the sharp whistle and the metallic, strident ring of bullets striking the stones dotting the ridge, filled the air. The tattoo of the enemy drums resounded.

Men began falling on both sides. Down in the plain, the slavers were dancing in the tall grass, and firing as fast as they were able to. Baroundo got hold of his rifle, and sent three bullets in quick succession into two young witch doctors and a gigantic headman. That slowed the slavers' advance. But Baroundo was unable to catch a glimpse of Omdurrah.

Then Kukas, with Jean and the detail assigned to his protection, was gone. For a fleeting instant Baroundo heard Jean's protesting voice and whispered: "My young master. . . . You are hardly able to move, yet your brave heart would keep you here fighting at my side . . . but you must get your strength back before tackling Omdurrah again. . . ."

The slaves were falling back. Accustomed to defeat, and without strong leadership, they felt that there were too many odds against them and did not dare to come at close grips with the advancing warriors.

Suddenly Baroundo noticed a stirring in a dense thicket east of the ridge. He quickly sent three or four bullets in that direction, heard distant cries of rage; then a stream of black warriors came out of that thicket.

Baroundo soon realized that they were endeavoring to turn the ragged line formed by the slaves. Frenzy seized him at the thought of his force fully routed, and of the slavers' pack rushing after the slow-moving litter conveying Jean. With loud shouts and curses, he rallied his men.

During his years of military duty, he had learned the method of retreat by echelons: a part of the outfit covering the falling back of their companions with rapid fire; then a stand of the latter while the men who fired first run farther back; and so on.

But that system, easily executed by steady and well-trained troops, doesn't work so well with black savages. Several times the retreating men of Baroundo ran into the bullets of their companions, who neglected to aim high enough to hit the enemy instead of their own.

An hour later a panic seized the slaves, who broke into a wild flight, dragging Baroundo with them.

Baroundo ran with them. But, in a narrow valley, he called a halt. Only fifteen men heeded him and lined up at his side.

Baroundo, with his rifle placed on a square boulder before him, began to sing the death chant of his people. Blood, from some minor scalp wounds, seeped through his white, kinky hair and ran together with copious perspiration all over his face. But his hands were steady and his eyes keen when the first pursuers entered the valley at a dog trot.

Slowly, unhurriedly, Baroundo fired, and each of his bullets hit its mark. The sight of the slavers, falling and remaining motionless on the shiny white stones of the valley's bottom, intoxicated the men who were with him to a fighting frenzy.

The fierce spirit of aroused savages at bay became fighting madness when the main body of the slavers attacked. They were halted and forced to give way.

BUT, a quarter of an hour later, the sound of the bellowing, deep, jarring voice that hatred had preserved in Baroundo's memory for many bitter years shrieked out a hoarse battle-call. Gun barrels and spear points gleamed on the steep slopes encasing the valley.

With a breakneck run, Baroundo and his handful of followers got clear of the trap that was closing in on them. But it was hopeless. At the end of the valley, crouching into holes of the ground and be-

hind big stones, they made their last stand.

Baroundo sobbed with rage because he was unable to see where Omdurrah was. The roar of that detested voice, thundering orders, challenging, reviling, tantalized him while most of his men fell, one by one, struck by a storm of bullets. Finally a slug struck his forearm. Keeping the barrel of his gun on a mound, using only his right hand, he kept on firing. But the accuracy of his marksmanship was gone; and soon the slavers surged compactly forward.

Like a dark, irresistible wave they swept through the defile. Several of them fell under the volley fired point blank by Baroundo and four survivors of his small band, then spears and axes struck savagely.

Baroundo, pinned down by the broad point of a lance deeply imbedded in his right shoulder, saw the snarling face of a warrior, deformed by a mess of tattoos and scars, right above him, and the big, curved blade of a heavy ax flashing in the air. Gritting his teeth, but without closing his eyes, he waited for the finishing blow.

Instead he heard a wheezing voice, ranting:

"This is the old black man who commanded them. He's the white warrior's sub-chief. Take him to Omdurrah!"

The spear point was brutally wrenched out of his shoulder. Strong fingers dug into his ankles and dragged him, his nape and shoulders bumping on the stones of the valley's bottom, then hard feet kicked his rolling body.

Baroundo heard a concerted, ear-splitting howl of triumph. With a supreme effort he stuck his hands into the ground, lifted his head and saw Omdurrah, heavily planted on his big feet, in front of his prone body.

"Spawn of a dog and a bush swine!" Omdurrah snarled, "for days my spies, unnoticed by your lookouts, searched and finally found your hiding place. I came to destroy you in all my glory, with the clamor and the power of the thunder. But, where's the white man? You who are his right arm, speak, before I tear your entrails out of your belly."

The breath came in strangled snarls out of Baroundo's tortured mouth.

"You shall not see him," he stammered, "until that moment when he is ready to kill you. Do you remember, O dung of the jungle, O traitor, the night when you slaughtered a white woman and her husband, the white chief of soldiers who had befriended you? I, Baroundo, I saw my wife Debele and my brother slain. . . . But I was that officer's servant. . . . I carried his son away, unnoticed by your cut-throats. . . . His son . . . the son of Lieutenant Rosen . . . is your enemy. . . . He has already defeated you at every turn . . . the leopards of the jungle, and not you, wounded him . . . but I, the former servant of his late father, I say to you, O vile Omdurrah: Jean Rosen shall destroy you. He'll . . ."

With a last pained growl, Baroundo fell flat on his face and remained motionless. Omdurrah, his eyes popping and bloodshot, his teeth grinding, was going to pounce on him, dagger in hand, when a desiccated arm struck like a black bar before him.

Omdurrah shot a venomous glance at the towering headdress of ostrich feathers and at the panoply of amulets hanging from the scrawny neck of Onunda, and hissed savagely:

"Get out of my way, O master of lies and magic!"

But an inflexible gleam, and a cold rage fiercer than his own roaring fury were in the small, deep-set eyes of the witch doctor.

"Fool!" he whispered tensely. "You would kill quickly . . . and he, in a swoon, would not feel the pain of death. Leave him to me, Omdurrah! Soon we shall see helpless rage and sorrow twisting his face when his master will be tortured slowly, for days, before him . . . and, after the white man's death . . . this sturdy warrior's blood will be a fitting offering for the mighty leopard ghost."

A light of understanding shone in the cruel eyes of Omdurrah.

"You're right!" He spat. Then he ordered his men to look for the trail left by the escaped white man.

LATE in the afternoon, the two hundred warriors still left to Omdurrah sighted the litter on the edge of a jungle.

With loud cries of triumph they catapulted after it. But the litter and the disabled Jean on it were already well hidden by the jungle when the yelling slaves

charged into the tangle of dense growths at the jungle's border.

A hissing volley of tiny darts met them.

An enormous headman leaped into the air, slapped at his throat, then fell flat on his back and remained motionless. All around him, warriors stung by the arrows growled and cursed, but they died quickly, poisoned by the arrows.

Finally a squeaky voice shrilled from among the upper branches of a tree:

"The litter and the great Lion King in it are gone! You shall never get hold of it because I, Mbouro, hid it! For I'm Mbouro, mighty warrior, glorious chief of the little people! In the jungle and in the forest, no big oaf of a bush warrior can stand before the poison of my darts!"

A sudden panic stopped the slavers in their tracks. Ash-gray with fright, they stared wildly all around; then they began firing in all directions, struck their spears in all the thickets and bushes within their reach. But, scattered as they were, and without any idea of the pigmies' hiding place, they only wasted ammunition. The deathly volleys of arrows kept taking heavy toll among them.

Finally a squat headman yelled:

"Three out of every ten of our band have already been killed! Let us flee before we all die!" and ran toward the open ground, followed by the beaten remainder of the flying column.

AN hour later, that same headman confronted Omdurrah and explained why it had proved impossible to capture the white man. Without uttering an answering word, Omdurrah pulled a pistol out of his sash and shot him through the head. Then, dividing his men into orderly squads of riflemen and spearmen, he led them in cordon-like formation into the jungle. Volley after volley tore through bushes and thick walls of vegetation. Numberless wild beasts were killed or driven away.

That combing, with its waste of bullets, and the lurid scarlet glare of blazing torches, lasted through the night. But when morning came and the slavers reached the valley beyond the jungle, it became apparent that they had spent the night fighting the unopposing forces of nature.

For before the main force of the slavers could reach the jungle, Mbouro had directed the removal of Jean and of the giraffes into his forest fastness, where even Omdurrah didn't dare to pursue.

Sixty of Omdurrah's men had been killed, and another twenty badly wounded. The escaped slaves had been thoroughly routed, but they had left only ninety men on the battlefield and along their line of retreat. Thus, the score of the losses was nearly even, and the moral effect of the victory on the ridge was exploded by the rout in the jungle.

Omdurrah, however, exhibited Barounda and the other prisoners in the *boma*, and sent messengers to his fortress of the Mbumu and to the Bahr el Ghazal, boasting of his successes.

But the trusted men despatched to Mbumu returned, reporting that the warriors located there refused to recognize Omdurrah's leadership as long as his troublesome white enemy remained at large. The leopard and tiger cat warriors had atempted to launch raids of their own in the Bahr el Ghazal, but had met reverses and blamed Omdurrah for their misfortune. To make matters worse, Omdurrah's lieutenant, Touho, returning with two hundred captives of splendid physique, had been stopped by another and stronger force of raiders commanded by full-blooded Arabs, and forced to turn over his prizes. All concluded, one thing was clear: Omdurrah had to capture his white enemy, and soon, if he wanted to return to the peak of power he had attained with so many years of violent deeds. The alternative was gradual ruin, and death.

In secret conclave with Onunda, the brutal chieftain weighed what to do. Finally, a swarm of messengers came out of the *boma* and went south. A few days later, they ran along the paths of the jungle where their companions had been routed, and along the edges of the forest where the pigmies were masters, shouting at the top of their lungs:

"Omdurrah challenges the Lion King Je-an to the test of the pullets and poison. If Je-an accepts, Baroundo will be set free. If Je-an refuses, Baroundo dies under torture.

"The winner of the test will remain master in Uele. The loser will leave forever."

A few days later, four escaped slaves,

sound of wind and sturdy of legs, appeared with a white flag of truce under the log walls of Omdurrah's *boma.* Refusing all invitations to come into the fortress, they shouted that, for Baroundo's sake, Jean accepted the proposed test. But that the locale of it had to be the prairie west of the knoll, scene of the destruction of the baboon herd, which was located midway between the *boma* and Jean's camp, and surrounded by open ground unfavorable to treacherous moves, was the only place out of his immediate neighborhood where Jean was willing to trust Omdurrah.

IX

OMDURRAH sat cross-legged on a pile of cushions pilfered from a slaughtered caravan, when Onunda, tall, lanky, evil-smelling and hopping like an enormous grasshopper, came into the big, rambling house that was the seat of power of the murderous Sultanj.

"Omdurrah," Onunda wheezed, shaking his wizened head and his claw-like hands, "it will not work! Je-an will never agree to face any test under the log wall of our *boma.* And beware, Omdurrah! Ruin and death shall be your lot if Je-an reaches the conclusion that you'll never give him a fair chance of delivering his Baroundo!"

Omdurrah's bulging eyes glowed like live coals. The floor of packed sod of the room shook when he sprang on his big, sprawling feet. Onunda howled like a frightened cur and, on all fours, crawled into a corner.

The moans and subdued sobbing of Omdurrah's wives, who fearfully squatted in the opposite corner, turned the Sultanj's rage into a murderous frenzy. Uttering beastly snarls, he got hold of the brass bowl; his enormous chest swelled, his muscular arm heaved. Ear-splitting screeches of abject terror filled the room when the heavy brass container sailed into the air and struck a young negress, who fell with blood oozing out of her crushed skull.

Then Omdurrah leaped after Onunda. The ponderous muscles of his arms and shoulders tensed into steely knots as he stooped above the witch doctor, who, in his wild panic, thrashed with hands and feet as if he were trying to imbed himself into the ground.

"Aarrgh! Is my plan bad? Do you want Je-an to have his way, O desiccated carrion deserted by the magic ghosts?" Omdurrah spat. "Speak, quickly, before I break every bone of your carcass! What would you do, to crush that white spawn of a dog?"

"Do not strike me!" Onunda desperately wailed. "How can I think with your insane fury on top of my old body?"

Omdurrah kicked him. Onunda shrieked at the top of his lungs. Then a flow of words poured choppily out of his toothless mouth:

"Let the test take place on the plain chosen by Jean . . . but line up our men behind us . . . the riflemen at the wings! There'll be no need of bloodshed if the test turns in your favor. But, if it doesn't . . . I'll accuse Je-an of treachery . . . I'll ask a second test . . . and, while I argue with him, our riflemen will all fire against him . . . the cross-fire will tear his body to shreds!

"That's my plan, carried out in a way that will fool Je-an up to the moment of his destruction."

Omdurrah, mollified, growled. "But," he roared, in a new fit of mad fury, "what assurance have I that, on that plain, Je-an shall not catch me in some snare of his own?"

"I shall go to inspect every stretch of the plain," Onunda hurriedly blurted.

"Then go! At once!" Omdurrah shouted at the top of his lungs.

Whimpering, the witch doctor sprang on his feet and ran crouching out of the house.

ONUNDA found Jean, who had recovered from his wounds, on the prairie selected for the test. It was the first time that the witch doctor had an opportunity of observing his master's enemy at close range, and his eyes apprehensively narrowed as they scanned the wide shoulders, the lithe, powerful limbs, and the effortless strength of all the motions of the white youth. But what cowed Onunda most was the fire of intelligence shining in Jean's eyes, which he mistook for an uncanny glare. The old witch doctor, who believed in his own power of magic, nursed a fear that the young white man was *hyondo,* furnished with supernatural powers.

With a shaking hand he fingered the mummified monkey's paw, bound with cured human skin, which was fastened to the very middle of the necklace of charms hanging from his neck. Then his stare shifted to the freed slaves, who stood behind Jean. The sixty surviving freed slaves were all armed with guns, and their assurance stirred a chilly worry in Onunda's heart.

"Did these traitorous slaves and your accursed pigmies build elephant traps and other snares in this plain?" he stammered after a pause.

"A real master of magic should not need to ask any question from a mere human," Jean taunted. "But walk around, find out by yourself!"

For five weary hours, Onunda and the warriors of his escort inspected the plain and its surroundings. They finally returned to the place where Jean, with affected indifference, was roasting a quartered antelope over a camp-fire. Onunda was hungry; but Jean did not invite him to share his meal. At length the witch doctor illhumoredly growled:

"I shall bring the fowls. Four prime ones."

"You mean, four poisoned ones who would flop dead before they could peck at the venomous millet of the test!" Jean sneered. And Onunda, who had devised that last ruse, cursed and nervously clutched his wand.

"There's one thing that must be done, to force you to play fair, and to stop Omdurrah from crying out that I tricked him if I win," Jean pitilessly continued. "In the day before the test, four of your pullets and another four furnished by my pigmies must be brought here and placed in a single cage. Just before the poison trial, a stick will be thrust into the cage. The four pullets who brush the stick first—no matter if yours or mine—shall be used for the test. And Baroundo must look upon it as a free man, at my side."

"Baroundo shall not be delivered to you until the test is over!" Onunda screeched, waving his scrawny arms like a scarecrow shaken by the wind.

"Desiccated swine!" Jean exploded. "I owe my life to Baroundo, who carried me into the jungle when Omdurrah betrayed and killed my parents; and, for his sake, I was willing to make a gift to Omdurrah of his foul life; because, at the very worst, if the test should turn against him, he could leave Uele with his whole skin.

"But, now, I can see through Omdurrah's plans and yours! You don't intend to give Baroundo up! You desire his death and mine! Such being the case, what's the use of bandying words any longer? Run back to your accursed master and tell him that I'm going to slay him, you, and all your cutthroats among the ruins of your *boma!*"

A deep-throated howl of savage hatred arose from the ranks of the freed slaves. Onunda cringed when he saw a couple of pigmies leering and patting their deathly bows.

"Nothing will trick this white giant!" the agonizing thought throbbed in his mind. *"But, if he marches north with all his men and his giraffes, we shall be destroyed. . . ."*

"I trust my magic and Omdurrah's might," he finally choked. "I accept all your conditions." To restore his badly shaken prestige before the warriors of his escort, he added: "But I take possession of the northern half of this plain and I put a charm on it. . . ."

"Whaah!" Jean contemptuously interrupted. "Your conjurations couldn't harm a lizard!" Then his eyes gleamed shrewdly. "I take possession of the southern half of the plain!" he thundered. "From this moment until the test is over, any warrior of yours putting foot on it shall be shot down!"

When the towering headdress of ostrich feathers of Onunda and the black bodies of his men became tiny dots in the distance, Jean called his freed slaves.

"Omdurrah and Onunda will try to win by treachery, but we shall be ready for them," he announced. "Get ready to plant the sharpened stakes!"

X

TWO days later, the discordant clamor of yard-long trumpets, and of rattles and drums fashioned out of empty gourds, rang on the plain when Omdurrah came to the meeting at the head of sixty spearmen and a hundred and twenty warriors armed with guns.

A cold rage choked Jean as he saw the murderer of his parents advancing toward him. Then he turned to look at his followers and a grim certainty that the very treachery of his enemy was going to play into his hands steadied his nerves.

Everything was ready. Twenty freed slaves, powerful men armed with rifles, short *assegais* and axes, clustered behind him. Some fifty yards back and to the right and the left of his first line, two lines of twenty freed slaves each stood with their rifles in the crook of their left arms and their right fingers on the trigger. A hundred yards farther back, forty pigmies waited behind two stretches of prairie covered with a thick grass which hid a huge number of sharpened stakes planted into the ground.

Touho, the lieutenant and right-hand man of Omdurrah, stared suspiciously at that line-up of the white youth's force. His scarred face contracted as he tried to make out what Jean was up to. Finally he blurted:

"Sultanj, I don't like the deep, square-like formation of our enemies' array. Their riflemen are posted in a way that will enable them to kill many of the riflemen making up our wings."

The towering headdress of black ostrich feathers of Omdurrah shook threateningly. The bulky muscles of his belly tensed against the pistols stuck in his belt.

"What do you care if some of our men will die, provided that they kill the accursed Je-an first?" he growled. "Leave all the thinking and the commanding to me, Touho. Look at Kukas . . . you killed his woman."

Touho was a tall, rangy negro, with a fat chest as hard as iron and enormous knotty fists.

"My spear will hack Kukas' thighs to shreds. Then it will pluck the entrails out of his slashed stomach," he spat. But there was a bleak fright in his eyes as they fastened on the erect, powerful figure of Je-an.

Then the voice of the Lion King rang like a peal of thunder: "Where's Baroundo? Send him to me at once, or we attack."

Onunda hastily slashed the ropes binding Barundo's wrist and shoved him forward. Lamely, because his wounds had not fully healed, the former orderly leaped out of the slaver's array and hurried to his white protector.

"They tortured me. Don't trust them, Je-an, my deliverer," he sobbed, as he came abreast of Jean.

The white youth's lips set in grim line as he saw the convulsed face and the scarred, wasted frame of his humble friend.

"I'm ready for them, Baroundo," he whispered tensely. "Can you still shoot straight?"

"Just as straight as in the days when I was your father's servant!"

"Then grab the extra gun that my men brought for you. Before the day is over you shall look on the dead faces of our enemies."

THE trial began. Reared as he was in the African wilderness, Jean was still a white man, and the poison and pullet test was for him just a mummery. But in the awed imagination of the black warriors of the two opposite forces the pullets had ceased being fowls and were the tools of invisible, monstrous ghosts hovering above them. The sun drew countless gleams out of the weapons clutched by their shaky fists as they stared with bated breath at Onunda, mixing with a stick a poultice of millet, water and poisoned powder into a hole in the ground.

A concerted moan rasped out of scores of contracted black throats when the first two pullets, brought close to the mixture, pecked greedily at it with the customary stupidity of all fowls and, immediately after, stretched their necks, opened their beaks wide, frenziedly beat their wings and collapsed, spasmodically closing their claws.

Mumbling conjurations and making portentous passes, Onunda removed the dead pullets. The first phase of the test, aiming to prove that the poison worked, had taken place according to age-old custom.

A deep silence descended on the plain when the second pair of fowls were placed near the hole. The black faces of the warriors all around turned ash-gray. Only Omdurrah grinned, trusting in the final success of his treachery. And, looking at him, Jean's worry faded.

"I calculated right," he thought fiercely. *"This foul animal is getting ready to spring*

some trap of his own. Oh, my poor father and mother! Beasts of prey feasted on your desecrated corpses. But soon I shall slay your murderer."

"Master," he suddenly heard Baroundo's tense whisper. "If the test turns in his favor, Omdurrah will make a show of abiding by it. But he'll set spies after you . . . to kill you later. . . ."

The torturing vise of worry gripped Jean's heart, as he watched the test begin. What if he lost the test?

Then his eyes opened wide. A luscious worm had come out of the ground; and one of the roosters was pouncing on it.

Omdurrah jumped up and down, shrieking, uttering curses. But the rooster had completely forgotten the poisoned millet. With its crest cocked sideways, it pulled hard. The worm, which had attempted to wriggle back into the ground, was uprooted, thrown into the air, caught and stunned by a blow of the rooster's beak; then, cackling, the fowl swallowed its prey and strode toward the ranks of the freed slaves, who reverently made way for it. Nobody bothered to glance at the other rooster which, after swallowing some poisoned millet, was thrashing in its death throes.

Jean's pent-up excitement exploded in a thunderous battle-cry. Freed slaves and pigmies shouted triumphantly. The warriors of Omdurrah, on the contrary, stared fearfully at the heavens above them. In their feverish imagination, the all-powerful ghosts who had given victory to the white youth were floating above the plain, planning some portentous evil.

Suddenly Omdurrah savagely howled:

"The test is void! Lion King won by trickery!"

Almost instantly, a curse rasped out of his throat; for with the precision of well-drilled men the two squads of freed slave riflemen were aiming their guns at him. Then he heard Jean's challenge like a peal of doom.

"Miserable murderer, the test was fair! But, if your hands have not turned into flabby and decayed hunks of carrion, if there is any shred of courage in your foul heart, grasp a spear and fight me in single combat, without expecting or giving any quarter!"

Omdurrah turned his head and stared wildly at his followers. But Onunda only gaped at him, utterly overcome and frightened. An inscrutable, calculating expression was twisting Touho's ugly features. The faces of the rank and file of the slavers were stupid blanks. Shame and an unspoken appeal to their cornered Sultanj soon contracted them, when the freed slaves and the pigmies shouted contemptuous insults and challenges, and Baroundo taunted at the top of his lungs:

"Vile merchants of human flesh, servants of a giant bundle of cringing grease! How long will you obey the orders of Omdurrah, who is afraid to fight in defense of his honor as a warrior?"

"If my riflemen shoot down Je-an, Je-an's riflemen will kill me! I present too much of a big target to them!" Omdurrah agonizingly thought.

The issue was plain. He had to fight Jean, or forfeit the allegiance of his last band of warriors.

Omdurrah shook his enormous head and tightened his grasp on the spear that he held in his left hand, on the handle of the enormous ax clutched by his right first. Suddenly he sprang.

But Jean was not caught by surprise. With a cat-like leap he side-stepped the stab of Omdurrah's spear and struck sideways with his own lance. Blood spurted out from an ugly gash on one of Omdurrah's thighs. Then Jean jumped back, feinted, lunged. In the nick of time Omdurrah arched his bulky frame, but the razor-sharp blade of Jean's lance cut through the thick muscles of his side.

OMDURRAH howled like a stricken bull, and whirled his ax with all the dexterity he was able to command. Before his headlong charge Jean gave way slowly. Suddenly one of his bare heels slid on the grass, and he fell to one knee.

Omdurrah's bloodshot eyes glared murderously. Shrieking at the top of his lungs, he hacked down with a tremendous blow. Gathering all his strength, Jean leaped aside on all fours. The big blade of the ax missed his shoulder by a fraction of an inch and imbedded itself into the ground.

Carried by the momentum of his charge, Omdurrah nearly fell on him. Like Simba the Lion, the white youth sprang upward. His right fist uppercutted with all the

power of his steely muscles. Caught squarely under the chin, Omdurrah was hurled backward.

But there was such a terrific strength in the thick neck of the Sultanj that that blow, which would have fractured the jaw of a lesser man, only stunned him. He fell heavily, but he propped himself up when Jean catapulated against him with lowered spear.

Instinctively, Omdurrah parried with his left arm, which was slashed from wrist to shoulder. The ax fell out of the limp fingers of his left hand. The king of the slavers was helpless!

A full throated scream of dismay arose from among the slavers' ranks. The freed slaves and the pigmies triumphantly roared, cheered Jean at the top of their lungs.

In that supreme instant, a vision flickered in Jean's mind of his father, straight and trim in his uniform, of the gentle face of his mother. Deaf to the clamor all around, he heard only the savage howling of the tribesmen milling in the madness of bloodthirsty victory in the courtyard of Lieutenant Rosen's conquered *boma*. Jean's lips curled, baring his teeth, as he crouched, swinging lightly his spear, getting ready for the kill.

Then Baroundo was beside him, howling, sobbing:

"O master! For years I have waited! Give me the greatest pleasure life can offer. Let me kill him, with my own hands!"

Jean growled like a lion who sees a jackal pouncing on his kill. He was lifting his free hand to shove Baroundo aside, when his glance fell on the old and fresh scars covering the body of the former orderly. As in a dream he heard Baroundo shrieking:

"Most of my wounds were suffered for your sake and in your service, O my master and son of my master!"

Jean bit his lips, saw Omdurrah slinking back, covered with gore.

"You're asking much from me, Baroundo," he choked. "But have your way!"

THAT moment of respite broke the spell of utter dejection that had held Onunda gripped during the duel. Frenzied by the realization that Omdurrah's end meant also his own death at the hands of the former slaves, he yelled:

"Slavers, you have no pity to expect from your escaped victims! Save your Sultanj if you wish to live! Kill!"

Touho sprang forward, a veteran warrior.

"Onward! Fight, slavers!" his raucous, full throated voice rang above the tumult.

The roar of the guns of the opposite arrays of riflemen, firing against each other, followed that frenzied appeal, when Touho and the spearmen of the center of the slavers' line surged forward.

At the top of his lungs Onunda reviled the slaver riflemen who had failed to shoot Jean during the duel. The pigmies belonging to the central array of the white youth's force quickly shot two volleys of arrows, then crawled between the legs of their freed-slave comrades and scampered out of the *mêleè*.

Brief as it was, the part played by the twelve little tribesmen defeated Touho's bull-like tactics, for the poison smeared on the arrow tips killed nearly all the warriors of his front rank, the slavers who came next stumbled over their bodies and the shattering power of the charge was broken. Pell-mell and in utter confusion, Omdurrah's shock-fighters threw themselves on the sharp points of the lowered spears of the massed free slaves and were routed with heavy losses. But, instead of pursuing, Jean took advantage of the ensuing lull in the combat and skirting a wide expanse of ground over which the grass thickly grew led them to a bare knoll some three hundred yards back. There he reformed them on a triple line.

From the place of comparative safety far behind the scene of the struggle, where he had been dragged by three of his bodyguards, Omdurrah witnessed Touho's setback with glittering eyes.

"Mbessi," he eventually blurted to the fleetest of the three warriors, "the accursed Onunda reported that there are no elephant traps or other pitfalls on this plain. But pigmies are perhaps hiding in that grass, and our spearmen must throw javelins into it, to kill as many of the little monkey-men as possible, before going to the final attack. But under no circumstances must they wade into the tall grass."

Jean laughed grimly when he saw Touho's warriors come forward and throw all their light spears into the grass.

"Fools," he smiled to Kukas, who stood beside him like a massive image of wrath. "They are trying to kill the sharpened stakes that we planted yesterday. But they'll feel their bite, before the day is over."

Kukas grunted grimly. The muscles of his powerful shoulders knotted and his big hands wrapped themselves firmly around the shaft of his battle ax as he glared at the headdress of ostrich feathers waving in the breeze above the tall figure of Touho.

The slaver spearmen, and the riflemen who had joined them, finally deployed at a hundred yards from Jean's force, with the grassy glade at their shoulders.

THE anticipation of the coming struggle was gripping Jean. With anxious eyes he scanned the eastern edge of the horizon and heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief when he saw a line of tawny dots coming out of a distant wood. Then reports crashed. A freed slave beside him dropped his spear, collapsed with a curious diving motion and remained still.

"I can't wait for Mbouro's arrival," Jean thought rapidly. His piercing glance fell on the bristling spear points of the enemy, flashing under the hot sun. His eyes flashed and, turning he waved his long lance before the first line of his men and thundered:

"Much blood has already been shed on this plain, but have you forgotten the gory corpses of your parents and children in your burning villages? Have you forgotten your sisters and wives, ravished, slaughtered and sold like cattle by Omdurrah and his murderous horde? Your abusers, your ruthless enemies are there, right before you! Go, and kill them, if you have not forgotten your manhood!"

A hatred and a killing lust that left no room for any other feeling convulsed the freed slaves. An ear-splitting shout of revenge and frenzied rage arose from their compact ranks. Suddenly they ran forward.

Touho was a dangerous warrior and a veteran of scores of combats. But his scarred face became ash-gray at the sight of the dilated eyes, snarling mouths and crouching bodies of the former slaves. He tried to bark an order, but his contracted throat could not give forth any sound. Then the enemy was upon him. With the strength of desperation he stabbed at Kukas, who was leaping on him.

The broad point of his spear imbedded itself in Kukas' side and remained stuck in it. But, growling like a wounded beast of prey, Kukas gathered all his fading strength in a mighty sweep of his battle ax. The sharp, twenty-inches long blade fastened to the fore-half of the ax's shaft sliced the top of Touho's shoulder, bit deeply into his neck and almost decapitated him.

The panicky slavers got a glimpse of Touho's fall and of the wounded Kukas pouncing on his corpse. They saw the Lion King's lance, whirling with dazzling speed, striking down three tall warriors. Then they were overpowered, scattered into separated groups and rolled back by the catapulting mass of maddened freed slaves.

A thick, blinding cloud of dust, lifted by the scores of trampling feet shrouded the welter of lusty black bodies, straining against each other, falling, arising again. The dead and the wounded, kicked about in the mad fury of the combat, rolled underfoot like shapeless, dirt-coated logs.

Then agonizing cries rang. The slavers had been driven into the grass, and the sharp stakes planted by Jean's men deeply slashed their feet and calves. Some of them remained stuck, with bloody wooden points jutting out of their pierced feet. And in that very moment Jean's third line, formed by the pigmy forces, came forward bending their deadly bows.

Toward the north and the east sped the frantic survivors of the slavers' force. To their amazement, the slaves did not fire after them. But soon they saw the reason of that apparent respite, and stark terror rooted them on their tracks; for, inexorably, a big herd of giraffes, deployed on an enormous half-moon formation, was galloping toward them. And what convinced the superstitious survivors of Omdurrah's horde that the Lion King was *hyondo,* endowed with supernatural powers, and, therefore, invincible, was the sight of a little black man—of Mbouro—crouching on the hump at the root of a big bull-giraffe's neck and waving signal orders with one hand. Then, throwing down their weapons, the defeated slavers knelt, stuck their foreheads into the ground and with

agonized cries begged mercy from the white youth and from their former victims, the freed slaves.

TOUHO'S death, the destruction of the slavers' force and the giraffes' arrival paralyzed Onunda. Like a stricken and bewildered animal seeking by sheer instinct the leader of its herd, he ran to Omdurrah's side.

The Sultanj's wounds had been filled with healing moss and crudely bandaged by his bodyguards. But now everyone, even Mbessi, had deserted him. However, in that supreme moment, with his power utterly collapsed and death hovering near, Omdurrah's savage and ruthless soul refused to acknowledge defeat. His deep, bull-like voice ranted curses on Jean, on Baroundo, on the dead Touho and on the leopard totem-ghost which he called false and betrayer.

Onunda's hysterical cries interrupted the frenzied oaths pouring out of the swollen lips of the murderous Sultanj, who, tortured by red hot stabs of pains searing the torn flesh of his wounds, turned to face the terrified witch doctor.

"Omdurrah!"

Onunda, in his terror, clawed at the massive breast of the Sultanj. "What will happen to me? I fear Je-an . . . and even more . . . the hatred of the slaves. . . ."

Omdurrah's bloodshot eyes opened wide. His lips curled so that his purple gums became bare. His big, yellow teeth clamped like a steel vise. Suddenly his right fist closed around the hilt of one of the daggers stuck into his sash.

"In the name of our all-powerful leopard totem, have mercy! Omdurrah, I'm your friend, your associate. . . ." In a flash of fear-stricken sanity Onunda screeched. Then, desperately, he tried to side step the enraged Sultanj. He succeeded in doing so, because Omdurrah's motions were hampered by the pain of his crippled left leg. But before he could run away, Omdurrah with a clumsy leap overtook him.

Onunda was still shrieking and begging forgiveness when the Sultanj's dagger cut into his back, reaching a vital organ. Then, the blood welling into his throat choked his faltering voice. On all fours he sank to the ground. Above him Omdurrah cursed:

"You advised me to come here. . . . You went through this plain, and reported that there was nothing in it that could interfere with my victory. And, at the last moment, you didn't care what happened of me . . . you worried only about your carcass . . . you, scavenger, as accursed as the ghosts which you were unable to conjure."

Suddenly Onunda fell flat on his face and remained still.

Omdurrah slowly turned his massive head and gazed at the dusty plain.

The giraffes had halted. Jean was restraining the freed slaves, and herding all the prisoners into a trembling group.

Then Omdurrah saw a white-haired nego—Baroundo—coming toward him.

In that moment, and for the first time in his life, Omdurrah felt the icy clutch of fear. The pain of his wounds was unbearable. But, as long as a flicker of life was in his body, instinct would not let him give up his struggle for survival.

Omdurrah stared desperately toward the north. His *boma,* and the weak garrison that he had left in it, was too far. But there was a fringe of trees at the northern edge of the plain. He set out for that.

When he shot a last glance at the advancing Baroundo, he saw a dwarfish figure hopping after the former orderly. Mbouro, the pigmy chief, had learned that the Sultanj had been left by Jean to Baroundo's revenge. But Mbouro feared that, at the last moment, some ruse of the doomed Omdurrah could treacherously overcome his friend Baroundo; and, besides, the morbid curiosity of the pigmy would have not given up for anything in the world the sight of the death struggle of such a notorious chieftain as the former slaver scourge of the Uele.

STUBBORNLY, Omdurrah limped on. . . . It took him almost an hour to negotiate a distance which, under normal circumstances he could have crossed in fifteen minutes. And, as he dragged himself on, moaning and stumbling, his feverish brain formed awesome visions of galloping giraffes, of running freed slaves, of Jean swinging from tree to tree. Terror seized him in its grip.

But there was that thicket, at the northern edge of the plain; and he desperately refused to give up the wild, unreasonable hope beating in his heart. . . .

Finally, he tottered past the first fringe of trees and into a clearing surrounded by thick bushes. A pool of stagnant water at the foot of the rotting stump of a tree loomed to him like a miraculous boon, placed there by a friendly totem-ghost. Driven by his agonizing thirst he tried to kneel at the pool's edge, and, overcome by a surge of torturing pain, he nearly fainted.

Losing his balance, he fell face down in the pool, and almost choked with his face imbedded into the muddy and stinking water. With his belly swollen by a huge quantity of filthy liquid, which he had swallowed out of his own volition, and screaming with pain, he managed to arise and was startled by a snarling taunt:

"Do you remember, Omdurrah, the honeyed beer that you used to drink in your accursed *boma?* Never again will you partake of it!"

The cornered Sultanj wiped his eyes with the back of his right hand and saw Baroundo closing in on him with an ax in his right fist.

A lizard slithered out of a tuft of grass, before the former orderly's foot could clamp on him. Omdurrah thought desperately that he gladly would have changed his lot for that of the lowly lizard.

A wind was arising, sounding like the concerted moans of countless souls in hell.

"Omdurrah," Baroundo shrieked, "my young wife cried thus when your cutthroats murdered her, my brother and my white masters. Omdurrah, remember the cries of all the unhappy women and men tortured in the *boma* that you'll see no more."

The Sultanj gritted his teeth and clutched the dagger stuck into his belt—the dagger clogged with Onunda's gore. Baroundo crouched, tightened his grasp on the shaft of his ax and stepped forward.

Suddenly a sharp yell rang above the rustle of the wind:

"Mamba! Back, Baroundo!"

A thin, long snake had suddenly raised its darting head out of a bunch of rotting leaves between the former orderly and the crippled Sultanj. Baroundo hastily jumped back. Omdurrah attempted to do likewise and howled when a fiery stab of pain ran through his slashed leg.

As if attracted by his yells, the mamba sped toward him with lightning speed. Then the green whip of its slender body darted under his bulky frame. Its small, deathly head struck, again and again. Then the mamba slid back into the grass and Omdurrah fell, bent his body sideways and remained still.

"Who is fool enough to step where a mamba has holed in?" Mbouro squeaked, running to Baroundo's side, "but, just in case the poison of that snake had lost some of its virulence . . ." the string of his released bow whirred. A lethal dart struck the protruding belly of Omdurrah's corpse and stuck into it. . . .

TWO days later, on the esplanade confronting the fortress of the late Sultanj, Jean was joyously greeted by a swarm of freed slaves.

The news of Omdurrah's death had traveled fast. But the prestige gained by the Lion King's name was so great that the warriors left as a garrison had fled without carrying a single captive with them.

"Where did they escape?" Jean asked an elderly negro who seemed more intelligent than the rest.

The old man scratched his woolly head.

"Some," he stammered, "went to join the retinues of the Arabian slavers of the Bahr el Ghazal. Others marched toward the Mbumu country, where, as the tale runs, a fierce chief named Bunvassou trains fighting elephants and is becoming very powerful. But here, in delivered Uele, we shall safely live under your protection, O Lion King!"

"Jean, young master," Baroundo smiled, "it was a long and dangerous struggle. But you won, and the gratitude of all these people will always be with you, together with the blessing of peace."

Jean gazed at the succession of rugged hills and dense jungles extending toward the north and the east.

"No, Baroundo," he replied, shaking his head, "we gave Omdurrah and his murderers what they deserved. But the future is in the hands of fate."

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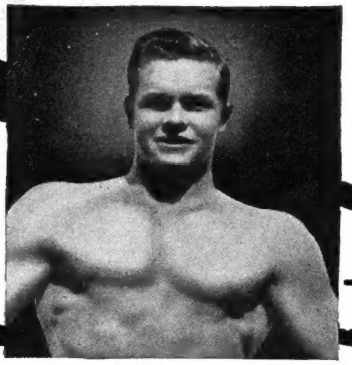

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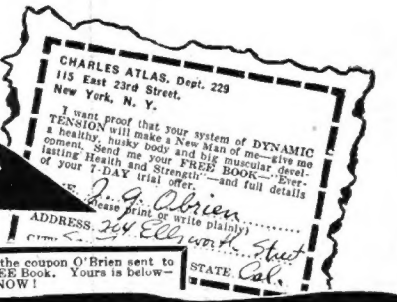
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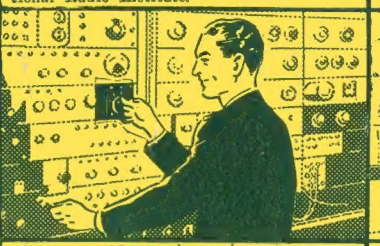

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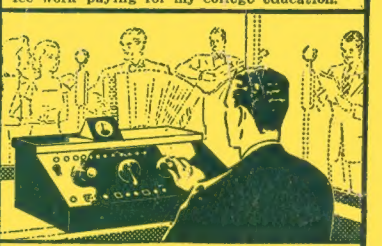

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